

Chapter 1

'Neither can live while the other survives'

This phrase was the only thought bouncing around the messy, raven haired head of Harry Potter as he descended the steps from the headmaster's destroyed office.

It was quite late at night, not that Harry would notice, as he walked aimlessly along the halls of Hogwarts. Had he been aware of his surroundings he would have noticed himself walking towards the hospital wing, where his friends were currently recuperating from their battle at the Department of Mysteries earlier that evening. The battle that ended in the death of Harry's much-loved godfather, Sirius Black.

He also would have noticed the tear-streaked face of fifth year Slytherin Daphne Greengrass along with her friends and roommates Blaise Zabini and Tracey Davis, also fifth year Slytherins. Both girls walking silently supporting their dorm-mate also completely oblivious to their surroundings.

Harry finally came back to himself when he pushed open the door to the hospital wing. Luckily the school nurse, Madam Pomfrey was already asleep having done what she could to aid Harry's injured friends.

The first he came across was Ginny Weasley, sleeping peacefully with her ankle elevated magically. An empty bottle of the disgusting yet useful potion Skele-Gro on her bedside table let Harry know that her broken ankle would be healed in due time.

With a pat on her good foot as he passed by he looked across from her and saw his dorm-mate and friend Neville Longbottom.

Neville had surprised him this year and this night especially. Neville's courage under fire and unwavering loyalty meant a lot to Harry. He was pleased to note that all that was left over of Neville's injuries were some faint bruising around his nose that was broken. Harry assumed that Neville was also subjected to the horrors of Skele-Gro.

The next bed he came across was his male best friend Ron Weasley. Harry stopped by the foot of Ron's bed and looked over him very closely. Ron looked completely unharmed apart from the bandages wrapped around his arms. Harry could smell the potions on the bandages from where he was standing. He had no idea what they could possibly be, he also had no idea what had happened to his best friend. The brains that had attacked him were the things of muggle monster movies.

Harry only hoped that the vast amount of potion bottles sitting by the bed would fix whatever had happened.

The last two beds sitting across from each other were the strange, blond haired Ravenclaw, Luna Lovegood and Hermione Granger. Harry always paused when his contemplations ventured across the topic of Luna. The girl was odd, he could not refute that, but he also saw something hidden in the girl. Something that told him the 'Loony' persona that the whole school had labeled her with was not all there was to her. Harry noticed that there were no potions bottles sitting near Luna, and she looked completely unharmed. He paused to wonder why the girl was in the hospital wing in the first place if she was uninjured, but remembering back to his many stays here, he knew that Madam Pomfrey would have kept her overnight for observation.

The last bed he came across, the one he was dreading seeing was that of his female best friend Hermione Granger. Harry's heart skipped a beat when he saw the state that his friend was in. His memories flashed the scene of her injury across his mind's eye and the feeling of utter desolation that overwhelmed him when he thought she had died. He had to admit to himself that she was the most important person in his world. Especially now that Sirius was gone, although that fact had yet to sink in. The sheer number of empty potions bottles laying next to his friend showed him how close to death she really was. He wished at that moment that he would be caught by Madam Pomfrey just so he would know what was happening with Hermione. He would gladly suffer through the poking, prodding, and inevitable overnight stay just to know that Hermione was ok.

"Hello Harry Potter." Luna said serenely.

Harry swung around to see Luna's protuberant silver-blue eyes staring at him from her bed.

"Luna! You startled me. I thought you were asleep."

"I stayed awake to make sure the Nestling Badgerworts were kept away. They like burrowing through bandages. It's what causes them to itch so much."

"Erm...right. Well, d-d'you know how everyone is?"

"Oh, yes. Ginny and Neville were given Skele-Gro to heal their broken bones. Neville will be released tomorrow and Ginny most likely the day after that. Ronald was given many potions to remove the toxins that were in his body, and will be watched over the next few days. They are unsure as to how he will react to what happened."

"And Hermione?"

At the mention of Hermione, Luna's eyes lost some of the dreamy quality and she looked down towards her feet. Just as she was about to speak, Madam Pomfrey came into the wing.

"Mr. Potter, I was wondering when I would find you here."

"I'm sorry Madam Pomfrey, I was trying not to disturb anyone. I just wanted to see how everyone was. Luna was about to tell me about Hermione. How is she?"

"Miss Granger was hurt quite severely. The curse she was hit with is a very dark curse that should have killed her almost immediately."

Harry's face fell at this. If his mind was not so numb at that moment, the shock and following guilt would have made his knees buckle.

"Luckily, because the incantation was silenced, the power of the spell was greatly weakened. She was brought to me in enough time that I was able to heal her internal injuries enough that she will survive."

How much impact this has on her in the future will be determined by how well the potions regimen will work. I have every confidence that she will not have any long lasting side effects."

"Thank you, Madam Pomfrey. I don't know what I would do if I lost her."

"You're quite welcome, Mr. Potter. Although, I would hope you would stick to normal visiting hours, unlike your second year. Now, into this bed with you while I check you out."

"Oh, no, I'm fine. Just a few scratches and bruises. They can heal on their own. I really would like to just go back to my dorm and sleep."

This was a blatant lie. Harry didn't think he would be able to sleep at all tonight. He just needed to get out of there. The walls of the hospital wing were already starting to close in on him.

"Very well, Mr. Potter, so long as you do just that."

As soon as he heard that, he bid Madam Pomfrey and Luna good night and all but ran out the door.

Harry knew that he wasn't going to sleep tonight, and he really didn't want to have to endure the stares and questions that he would obviously encounter in the common room in the morning. With that in mind, Harry made his way to the entrance hall and out the front door. At that moment, he needed the cold, fresh air and open space of being outside.

Since it was still a few hours before dawn, it was still pitch black outside. Harry didn't bother lighting his wand. He knew where he was going and could get there blind.

Harry made his way down to the lake to sit under his favorite tree. As Harry sat down, he let the happenings of the past day wash away from him into nothingness. He stared blankly out across the blackness of the lake. He didn't think, he didn't feel. He just sat.

The next morning, a few hours after dawn, when the rest of the students started stirring and getting ready for the day. Harry Potter still sat unaware of all that surrounded him.

In the Slytherin dorms, located underneath the lake in the dungeons of the school, Daphne Greengrass was already awake, washed and dressed. Her blood red hair hung loosely to her shoulder blades and her Ice Queen mask was firmly in place. She was ready to face the day as she had everyday for the past five years. While it was a somewhat lonely existence, as there were few people she let in past her defenses, it was also relatively safe. She kept herself apart from those in her house that were destined, even striving, to become the next generation of Death Eaters. Two of the people she let in closest were blond haired, blue eyed Blaise Zabini and the black haired, brown eyed Tracey Davis.

As long as they stayed in the background, unnoticed, yet showing no fear, she felt they would survive intact.

She left the common room heading to the great hall for breakfast, unaware of a set of grey eyes staring at her as if she were a meal.

It was early afternoon before Hermione awoke from her potion-induced slumber. As she came to, she heard the voices of all of her friends as well as the school nurse.

Hermione opened her eyes and tried to sit up, only to groan as the injury in her chest protested the movement.

"Good morning Hermione."

Hermione tilted her head as much as possible and took in the serene face and unfocused eyes of Luna Lovegood.

"Good morning, Luna" She replied with a scratchy voice.

"Miss Granger, you're awake!" exclaimed Madam Pomfrey from where she was checking on Ginny's broken ankle.

"How are you feeling?"

"Sore. Very, very sore."

"Yes, well, that's to be expected. It was a nasty curse you were hit with. Take these potions straight away. It will help to lessen the pain as I check on you."

Hermione pinched her nose and gulped down the foul tasting potions as she had seen Harry do so many times before. Luckily they were as effective as they were foul tasting and the pain in her chest lessened greatly, allowing her to sit up.

"How is everybody? Where is Harry? Is he ok?"

"Mr. Longbottom will be released after lunch, Miss Weasley tomorrow morning. I am going to keep you and Mr. Weasley for observation for a few more days. I want to make sure the potions regimen that I have you on is taking effect before I release you. Miss Lovegood...Miss Lovegood why are you still here? I released you last night."

"I was hoping to find a skittering nematoad. They can often be found around hospitals. They like the smell of the antiseptics."

"...Right, well, you are free to leave whenever you wish." And with an odd stare at the blond ravenclaw, Madam Pomfrey went back to her office.

"Do you know where Harry is, Luna?"

"Not currently, no. He was here last night. You were very popular last night, you know." Luna supplied with a knowing look into Hermione's eyes.

Startled Hermione stammered, "Uh, w-what do you mean popular, Luna? All of my friends, aside from Harry are here."

"Oh, but there were several others, other than Harry, that came and stood by your bedside last night, Hermione."

The little bit of color that had returned to Hermione's face quickly drained leaving her as white as the bedsheets she was laying on.

"Don't worry, Hermione, your secret is safe with me. I won't tell anyone."

"You won't? Thank you, Luna." Relief flooded Hermione, even as she regarded the younger girl. "There is more to you than meets the eye, Luna."

"Come now, Hermione, you should know not to judge a book by its cover. We all have our secrets that we keep and our masks that we wear."

Hermione stared into Luna's eyes, hard, for several moments, not noticing the faint blush on the blonde's cheeks.

"Oi, Hermione!" Startled, the moment was gone and Luna's eyes unfocused as she began inspecting the patterns of light on the wall above Hermione's bed.

"What Ron?"

"What were you and Loony talking about?"

This time Hermione did notice the drop in Luna's shoulders as Ron insulted her.

"Her name is Luna, Ronald, not Loony."

"Whatever, what were you two talking about?"

"Erm...w-we were--"

"We were discussing the Arithmancy O.W.L. I'll be taking mine next year, and I was asking Hermione if she would mind helping me study for it."

"And I told her that I would love to help her." Hermione replied, realizing that it was more than just a cover.

"It's a week before the end of term, and you are already talking about studying. Mental, the both of you."

"Some of actually like to make the most of our educations, Ronald!"

Ron opened his mouth to retort when the doors to the hospital wing opened, admitting their other best friend.

Hermione watched Harry as he walked in and immediately became worried for him. His shoulders were slumped he didn't have the normal bounce in his step and his eyes were glazed, downcast, and were almost lifeless.

"Harry! How are you? Are you ok?"

"I'm fine, Hermione, how are all of you?"

Hermione continued to watch Harry throughout the rest of the morning as the students tiptoed around the events of the previous evening. Luna watched both Harry and Hermione with an equal amount of interest. Both girls noticed how Harry did not really participate in the conversation unless he was spoken to.

At the first mention of Sirius, Harry quickly made an excuse about Hagrid and left.

"He's in so much pain."

"I know, Luna, but I don't think it's just Sirius. Something else is there. I need to find out."

"Let him come to you in his own time, Hermione. You know how he'll react if you corner him."

With a sigh, Hermione admitted Luna's point, but still harbored thoughts of finding out what was wrong with Harry.

When lunch appeared they all watched, with undisguised horror, as Ron set upon his meal like a swarm of locusts.

"Whu-?" Ron mumbled around a mouthful of chicken as he noticed everyone staring. He swallowed and said. "I'm hungry."

The next few days passed quickly. Harry's emotions were fluctuating wildly between completely unfeeling and a mass of pain, sadness and guilt.

He never stayed in one place for very long. Bouncing between the hospital wing, where his friends were, Hagrid's hut, and being alone under his favorite tree by the lake. No one could seem to get through to him.

Hermione found herself mostly in conversations with Luna. As most her friends were released from the hospital wing before her. she was surprised at how easily she got along with the younger girl, now that she was forced to talk with her. Hermione found that the Ravenclaw was as interested in Arithmancy and Ancient Runes as she was and found it refreshing to have yet another person to share knowledge with. She was even able to get around the strange creatures that Luna seemingly made up on the spot just to catch her off guard. Which, in some cases, was completely true.

Hermione also had a few more late night visitors, though she was glad to see them, she was worried that more than just Luna would catch them. She was afraid of what her friends would think and say. Especially if they knew the depth of the relationships involved. But, once again, it felt nice to have Luna in on the secret. The easy acceptance warmed Hermione's heart even more to the younger girl.

It was three days until the students left for home when Daphne Greengrass, Blaise Zabini, and Tracey Davis were walking through the dungeons towards the Slytherin common room.

"Oh dear me, what do we have here?"

All three girls froze in place and turned quickly starting to draw their wands, when they realized they were surrounded and outnumbered.

"Ah, ah, ah. Put those wands away ladies. Wouldn't want us to have to hurt you."

"What do you want Malfoy" Davis spat, while glaring at those surrounding them.

"Oh, just to let you know that your time for hiding in the shadows is up. Now that the Dark Lord is out in the open, the three of you are going to have to choose what you're going to do."

Malfoy stepped closer towards Greengrass, even as she backed up against the wall.

"You're going to be mine, all three of you. And I'll have you any way I want you." Malfoy had a leering look to his eyes that made all three girls shiver with disgust and immediately want to rush to the showers.

"The only choice you have is whether you'll take the mark willingly, or if you're going to require some...convincing. Personally, I hope you will need to be convinced. I think I could have a lovely time making you want to serve. Your days of being the 'Untouchables' are over."

After Malfoy and his toadies left, the three girls went into the nearest unused classroom, put up all of the silencing and privacy charms they could think of.

"What the hell are we going to do? I don't want to join the Death Eaters, and I would rather die than lay down for Malfoy."

"I know, Trace, we need to get outside help. We can't do this ourselves and our parents will be no help, as they are either indebted to a Death Eater, me, Death Eaters themselves, Tracey, or out of the country, Daphne."

"Well, we could go to Dumbledore, ask for asylum." said Daphne.

"You know as well as I do that isn't an option, Daph. He would just fend us off on Snape and that's the same as opening our legs for Malfoy anyway." replied Tracey.

"Yeah, and I'm the only one you open your legs for." said Blaise with a suggestive wink. "Listen, we all know who we need to talk to. He's the only option. We just have to get to him alone, which won't be too difficult between now and when we leave."

With a resigned sigh, Daphne answered "I know, I just didn't want to put Hermione in this position. You both know how worried she is that we'll be found out."

"It's going to come out sometime, if we tell Potter this way, hopefully he'll be too distracted by his hero complex to really get upset at Hermione."

"You're both right, we just have to find the right time. I don't think we have to worry about Malfoy acting too soon. At least not until Daddy Dearest is free."

Harry sat under his favorite tree as the sun was setting. None of his friends remained in the hospital wing, but he still wasn't spending much time with them. Someone always wanted to talk about Sirius or what was bothering him. The attention that they were starting to garner from the reports in the Daily Prophet were not helping either, although Ron was eating it up.

Harry was starting to come out of the denial of Sirius' death due to his conversation with Nearly Headless Nick and not getting any response from the now broken communication mirror that was given to him for Christmas. The final nail in his godfather's proverbial coffin was currently making its approach to land on Harry's knee.

A large crow that was an unnatural black color swooped down and landed lightly, startling Harry who was in another emotionless daze. Harry was confused by this bird because, while he understood that many different aviary creatures were used in delivering mail by witches and wizards, this one was holding no letter.

Harry just stared at the bird for several moments trying to decide what to do. Realizing that he was meant to do something, he gently reached out with his right hand, which was promptly bitten by the crow hard enough to draw blood.

"Ouch! Bloody bird! What was that for?"

Naturally, the bird did not respond. Instead it launched itself off of Harry's knee and, with a flash of silvery light, turned into a box.

Harry, who was still clutching his injured finger, was nonplussed. He carefully approached the box, which was covered in Runes as well as Harry's name written in big, bold letters in a script that Harry immediately recognized as Sirius'.

The hope of Sirius' continued existence that was steadily decaying in Harry's chest was suddenly renewed and with a huge grin, Harry opened the box to see that it had one letter, addressed to Harry, and at least four different scrolls.

Breathing hard, Harry opened the letter and began to read. Then slumped, once again as any and all hope that was flowing through him was destroyed with the first sentence.

'Dear Harry,

If you are receiving this, it means that I have died. I'm hoping that this happened when I was Dumbledore's age and surrounded by lots of beautiful, naked women. Although, I have a feeling that this won't be the case, and for that I can never be more sorry. I hate to think that I'm leaving you once again, but I can tell that my time is quickly coming. I only hope that I died defending you. I love you like the son I was never able to have, Harry. I could never be more proud of the man you are becoming. I take refuge with the knowledge that I'm not leaving you alone, Harry. Because I know, without doubt, that if Hermione is still alive, you will have someone to look out for you. Keep her close, Harry. From what I've seen, when you and Hermione are together, nothing can keep you down for very long. I know you'll keep your other friends close as well. Oh, and don't forget about Mooney. He'll always be there for you, too. He's getting his own letter, but without the package.

The reason that you can be sure that I am well and truly dead is that you would not have received this letter otherwise. You can see the

Runes I placed on the box. Those were tied to me. In the case of my death, the Runes transfigure the box into a crow which will immediately seek you, and only you, out. I also tied it to your blood, that's why the bird bit you. You are the only one who could have activated the magic to transfigure the crow back into the box. Speaking of the box, have a look inside. You will find the legal papers that I created when you were born that named you my legal heir if I died without a son. These papers will prevent any of my cousins from inheriting the Black Estate. Also inside is my updated will. I redid this puppy a few weeks after you went back to school. There are three copies. Keep one for yourself, hidden. Take one to Dumbledore, he can push it through the Ministry, if necessary. The last you should take to Gringotts. If the Ministry doesn't recognize the validity of my will because of my legal status, Gringotts will because I was never convicted. To the goblins, if there is no conviction, there is no legal reason to deny what I proclaim. Do this as quickly as possible. If Narcissa or, heaven forbid, Bellatrix get hold of the Black Estate, they will have control of headquarters and the order won't have time to evacuate or get their important documents out. The legal documents I've given you should circumvent that because I've left you as the head of the Black family and in possession of headquarters.

Unfortunately, leaving you the head of the family will not emancipate you, so if Dumbledore insists, you will have to return to the Dursleys. For that I am sorry. Being the head of two old pureblood families will also propel you into the heart of the pureblood political world. There are a lot of obscure rules that you will have to follow. They were written long ago by greedy men to screw over everyone they could and are supplemented and enforced by greedier men who want everything for themselves. Find someone to help you learn them. The marriage laws can be especially convoluted. I don't know what having two names to continue will do for you, but you are smart, you'll figure it out.

I know I've heaped even more problems on you, kiddo, but there is no one else I would trust to do this. I know you might be angry at me for it all, but don't you worry, I know that Prongs and Lily are going to give me a right good hexing once I get back to them. After that, we'll all be waiting for you and watching together. Just don't be like your dear old godfather and join us too early. On the other hand, maybe

you should be like me and die at a ripe old age surrounded by beautiful, naked women. I'm going to give my very last bit of advice, pup; trust in your friends and in your instincts. If you do that, I think you'll be able to live a long, long time. Just be sure to have some fun on the way, for ol' Padfoot's sake.

I love you and I will miss you,

Sirius'

Harry put down the letter, laid his head back against the tree, and closed his eyes. He didn't shed any of the tears that built in his eyes, because the ability to cry over emotions was beaten out of him at a young age. He thought about what Sirius said about his instincts and realized that the old dog was right. He didn't follow his instincts at the ministry. He panicked and ignored everything in him that told him not to go. He also ignored his friends. This realization didn't lessen any of the guilt, pain, or sadness he felt, it only hardened his resolve and determination to make himself better so he could protect those most important to him.

With that, Harry's eyes popped open and he dragged the box over to him. He read the heir papers and put them back where they were. He pulled out a copy of Sirius' will and opened it. Harry scanned through the document, his eyes widening not when he saw how much he was getting, or the property. He didn't really care about any of that. Though, he was pleased to see that Remus Lupin, the Weasleys, and Hermione getting not insignificant amounts themselves, he was surprised to be receiving three specific items; James Potter's journal, Sirius Black's journal, and Lily Evans Potter's diary. Sirius had told him that he was looking for them last Christmas. Sirius also told Harry that no matter when it was found, Harry would not be receiving the Sirius Black journal until he was sixteen and they had a long and uncomfortable talk.

Harry could only imagine what was in that journal. He also couldn't wait to read what was in his parents' journals as well. It would finally be the insight into their lives that he was unable to get anywhere else.

Wanting to get started on this immediately, Harry put everything but the letter back into the box, picked it up and set off towards Dumbledore's office.

While he walked, Harry worked on calming his emotions down so he wouldn't immediately start breaking things in Dumbledore's office. He also decided that if Dumbledore did not allow him to travel to Gringotts, he would either ask McGonagall to take him, or would find a way to go himself. He didn't know how he would, but his instincts told him to get the will processed immediately. He was going to trust them this time.

Harry reached the gargoyle, gave the password and was soon standing at Dumbledore's office door waiting to be allowed in.

"Come in." called Dumbledore.

"What can I do for you, Harry?" the headmaster asked as Harry entered the room.

Not bothering to look around to survey the damage, Harry set the box down on a chair, pulled out a copy of the will and set it on Dumbledore's desk saying "I just received a copy of Sirius' will. He told me to give this to you to take to the Ministry. He also gave me a copy to take straight to Gringotts. He said it was urgent. When can we go?"

Dumbledore, while Harry was speaking had opened the will and was reading through it. When Harry asked his question, Dumbledore finished reading and thought for a moment. "Sirius was correct, this matter is quite urgent. We shall depart first thing tomorrow morning. I will make portkeys that will allow us to travel to the door of Gringotts and back here when our meeting is concluded. Is this satisfactory, Harry?"

"Yes sir, thank you."

When Harry didn't make a move to leave, Dumbledore asked "Is there anything else you would like to discuss?"

Harry hadn't realized that he had not left yet because a thought had occurred to him when Dumbledore mentioned portkeys.

"Sir, could I ask you a few questions about portkeys?"

"Of course, my boy"

"Can you make a portkey that can be voice activated by muggles?"

"Yes, I can, Harry. Why do you ask?"

"I'm worried about the safety of Hermione and her parents, sir. Her being at the Ministry and helping to capture those Death Eaters is a major slap against Voldemort, sir. I think he will strike out at her this summer. I was wondering if you could make three voice activated portkeys for them to wear at all times that would deliver them to Grimmauld Place. It would allow me to rest easier knowing that they had that extra bit of protection."

"An excellent idea, Harry. What did you have in mind to give them?"

"Three simple bracelets would be enough, sir. Nothing too flashy or noticeable."

"Very well. What would you like the password to be?" said Dumbledore as he transfigured three pages of loose parchment into three separate leather bracelets.

"Oh, I don't know, something simple like 'Snuffles' house'."

Dumbledore then cast the portus spell on all three bracelets so that they glowed blue and jumped around a bit.

Harry pocketed the bracelets, picked up his box and said "Thank you sir, what time should I meet you?"

"Be here at seven tomorrow morning, Harry, we can leave directly from here and be at Gringotts right when they open."

"Thank you, sir, I'll be here. Goodnight, sir." replied Harry as he closed the office door behind him.

Harry then went back to his dorm to sleep. He would give Hermione the portkeys in the morning.

While Harry was receiving his package from Sirius, Luna was in the library with Hermione reading a letter she received from her father.

"Oh dear." Luna said sadly.

"What's wrong, Luna?"

"It seems that Daddy is going to be going on a trip out of the country. It appears my uncle has gotten into a spot of trouble in South Africa and Daddy has to leave immediately to help him."

"Do you have anyone to pick you up at King's Cross? What about your mother?"

"Oh no, Mummy died when I was nine. No, I'll make my way home myself."

"Oh, Luna, I'm so sorry! How could I have been so thoughtless, is that how you are able to see thestrals?"

"Yes, the experience was quite terrible." Luna said vaguely even as tears welled up in her eyes, but did not spill over.

Seeing this, Hermione moved close to Luna and put her arm around the other girl's shoulders.

"Well, you just can't stay home by yourself this summer, it's not safe. I want to invite you to my house for the summer, like the others, but I'm going on vacation with my parents for the first month. I can't ask them to cancel again, especially after we did on Christmas. Well, you'll just have to come along with us. I'd have to ask my parents, of course, and we are leaving to go on vacation a day or two after term ends for a month, but once I explain the situation to them, I'm sure they'd be glad to have you along. If you want to that is."

The hopeful, yet subdued look on Luna's face was all the incentive Hermione needed to stop her rambling and pull out her ink and a quill to begin the letter to her parents.

"Thank you for the offer, Hermione. It would be quite enjoyable to spend the summer with you. I could probably take the Muggle Studies O.W.L. with the knowledge gained from going with you."

"What are friends for, Luna? I'm going to run down to the Owlery to send this off right away, but then I have another meeting to get to."

"Oh, yes, wouldn't want to be late for that meeting, now would we? Goodnight, Hermione, don't let the Shivering Fleeceriders bite." smirked Luna as she left.

With a fond shake of her head, Hermione gathered up her belongings and hurried off to the Owlery.

Chapter 2:

The next morning Harry and Dumbledore went to Gringotts to get Sirius' will processed, which they were able to do without problem or fanfare. This was due to the fact that no other person had tried to claim this inheritance. The goblins were able to act so quickly in Harry's case because Harry had the magically binding documentation proving that he was the legal Black heir.

Harry received the Head of House rings for both the Potter and Black families. He decided to keep them stored in his trust vault because he couldn't wear them until he came of age the following year. He also received the three journals from his parents and Sirius. Those he clutched to his chest protectively until they returned to Hogwarts where he was able to store them safely in his trunk.

Harry wanted to start reading them straight away, but put them off because he knew he had other things to take care of.

Harry joined Hermione and Ron at the Gryffindor table just as lunch was starting. Having eaten so very little since that night, Harry was absolutely ravenous. Of course, Harry at his most ravenous could not dream to match the human vacuum that was Ron Weasley.

"Sweet Merlin, Ron! That pile of food is almost taller than I am!" exclaimed Seamus Finnegan as he walked by to his seat.

"I'm a growing boy, Seamus!"

"With how much you're eating, I'd expect you to grow bigger than Hagrid! Up as well as out."

As the rest of the Gryffs within hearing age chuckled at the banter, Harry quickly, yet still politely (compared to Ron, at least) shoveled his pile of food into his mouth.

"Hermione, could I talk to you privately when you are finished?" inquired Harry after he felt he had eaten enough.

"Of course, Harry. I'm finished now, would you like to go?"

Harry nodded and the two bid their goodbyes and made their way out of the Great Hall. They found the first empty classroom they could find and put up a few privacy spells.

"What's up, Harry?"

"I wanted to give you these, Hermione." Harry said while passing the leather bracelets to Hermione. "They are for you and your parents. I asked Professor Dumbledore to make them and turn them into voice activated portkeys. All any of you have to say is 'Snuffles' house' and your family will be taken directly to Grimmauld Place."

"Is Grimmauld Place still safe, Harry? I thought the closest living relative to Sirius (Hermione winced as Harry looked away) was Malfoy's mother. Wouldn't the house go to them?"

"No, that's where Professor Dumbledore and I went this morning. Sirius sent me a copy of his will as well as legal papers that make me the heir to the House of Black. I am now the head of two Ancient and Noble Houses. Although, I have no idea what that means. All of the other beneficiaries of the will are going to receive letter detail what they will receive. You and your parents will be completely safe at headquarters, since I own it now."

"Oh, Harry! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" Hermione cried as she launched herself into a bone crushing hug that Harry returned as best he could with his arms trapped under Hermione's.

"It was the least I could do for getting you so hurt that night, Hermione. --and don't even try to claim that you are better, I saw you wince as you hugged me. what is the latest report on that, by the way?"

Hermione looked down guiltily for trying to hide her injury from Harry as she said "Madam Pomfrey says I'll be right as rain in three or four weeks if I continue to take all my potions."

Relief flooded through Harry and he said "That's great, Hermione. Now you have the means to protect yourself and your parents from any lasting harm."

Hermione really wanted to talk to Harry about his feelings about Sirius, but remembered Luna's words in the hospital wing and tried to change tactics. Only to be cut off by Harry.

"Well, I just wanted to give you those. I'm gonna go to the owlery and spend some time with Hedwig. I'll talk to you later, Hermione."

Harry went to the owlery, retrieved Hedwig and headed back down to his favorite tree, this time with his father's journal in his hand.

The three Slytherin Untouchables found Harry at dinner time sitting under the tree reading, with Hedwig resting on his shoulder. They exchanged a look with each other and Daphne muttered to herself "Well, here goes nothing. Potter!"

Harry startled, and in one smooth motion spun around, stood up and drew his wand. Hedwig didn't even acknowledge that he had moved.

All three girls immediately put their hands up. "We don't mean any harm, Potter. We just came to talk."

"I'm not the gullible Gryffindor that everyone thinks I am. Accio wands. The girls made a move of protest, but they weren't fast enough to keep their wands from flying to Harry's feet. "Now that I feel just a touch safer, talk. Fast."

"Well, we need your help. The Death Eaters are going to be recruiting this summer and the three of us need a way out."

"You expect me to believe that? Aren't your parents Death Eaters themselves, Davis?"

"Yes, they are, Potter. That's why we need your help. If we don't have some form of protection, or somewhere to disappear to, it won't matter what we want. We'll just become playthings for the Death Eaters and their sons." Tracey shivered as she said this last bit.

"Exactly why do you think I should trust you? Pretty much every Slytherin I have run across has either taken great pleasure in mocking me, humiliating me, or outright trying to kill me. Why should I believe you three are any different?"

Blaise answered quickly "Everything we've done and said has been a show, Potter. We've been acting this way in public so we could survive in the Slytherin dorms."

Harry just raised an eyebrow and continued to stare at them in disbelief.

When Daphne saw this, she became desperate and blurted out "We're friends with Hermione!"

Stunned Harry replied eloquently "Wha?"

"The three of us are friends with Hermione. She trusts us. You can ask her. She was going to come to you for help for us if we hadn't. She wanted us to join your DA this year, but we didn't want to risk the exposure. Please Potter, trust us, we don't have anyone else we can go to for help."

Harry's doubtful look melted away into an angry scowl. Here was yet another person he trusted hiding something from him. It hurt even more that it was Hermione, he had trusted her more than Dumbledore.

Tracey saw that Harry was getting angry and began to step forward to say something, but stopped when Harry's cold, killing curse-green eyes focused on her and his wand snapped in her direction.

She held her ground, but kept her hands in the air where he could see them. She knew Hermione would be devastated if her friendship with Harry was damaged. So, she tried to distract Harry from his anger. "Focus, Potter! We're not here to talk about who is friends with whom. We need your help, and we need an answer before we get on the train."

"Fine, you're right. Why me? I'm not exactly the safest person to be associated with and I'm not very good at protecting people. The last person I tried to protect died in front of me. You would probably be better served asking Dumbledore or Snape."

"No, Potter, Dumbledore would just defer to Snape and Snape would just hand us to Malfoy on a silver platter to stay in good graces with his master." supplied Blaise.

"So, you don't trust Snape, either." With a loud sigh, Harry closed his eyes to think. Sirius' letter from yesterday came into his mind. 'Trust your friends, trust your instincts.' His friend, Hermione, had kept something huge from him, possibly for a long time. He didn't know what to think of that, and his instincts were muddled by the pain, grief, and anger he was feeling.

"What are you going to need?"

"We need a place we can disappear to. Somewhere safe."

"If you're such good friends with Hermione, why don't you ask her to keep you safe?"

"She told us to come to her house, but we won't be able to get there until a month into the summer. We might not be able to wait that long." said Daphne.

"Right, she's taking Luna with her and her parents on vacation. Fine, I need to think about this. You'll have my answer tomorrow before the feast. Now, I'm going to have a little chat with Hermione."

"Can we have our wands back now, Potter?" snapped Daphne, she hated feeling defenseless, especially since Harry hadn't lowered his wand an inch.

"No, I don't trust you not to hex me in the back." He bent down to pick up the wands, conjured a bit of string and tied them into a bundle. "Here, Hedwig." He said to his owl as he tied the wands to her leg. "Don't let them have these until I'm back in the castle. Oh, and just to

make sure you don't do anything to my owl..." He fired three quick leg locker curses that had all three girls laying on the ground.

"Damn you, Potter!" spat Blaise.

"You know, cursing my name is not a good way to convince me to help you." stated Harry conversationally as he ambled by them, still aiming his wand at them.

After they saw he was out of hearing range, Daphne said, "Well, that better than I thought it would."

"Better?! He stole our wands and cursed us!" yelled Blaise.

"Well, yeah, but I expected him to do that straight off and not listen to a word we said. At least he's thinking about it."

"I wonder if his reaction to Hermione is going to be the same." said a thoughtful Tracey as Hedwig flew down to release their wands.

Hermione didn't see Harry as he marched into the common room with an angry scowl on his face that sent most first and second years running for the hills. It also sent some sixth and seventh years running as well.

Hermione gave a startled shriek when Harry said curtly from behind her, "We need to have a talk Hermione. In private. Now."

"Harry?"

"Now, Hermione." barked Harry as he spun on his heel and left the common room again.

Hermione quickly put down her book and rushed off after Harry with a worried look on her face.

Once they found an empty class room, Harry locked and silenced it before turning and tossing his wand at Hermione's feet. He was so angry right now that he wasn't sure he wouldn't hex her. Still, no matter how angry he was, he didn't want Hermione hurt.

"Have anything to tell me Hermione? Any secrets to reveal?" snarled Harry.

Hermione backed away at the pure venom in his voice as her eyes widened.

"That's what I thought. How long have you been keeping this from me Hermione? From us?"

Hermione was still stunned, but she was still able to stammer out "S-so t-they came to t-talk to you?"

"Yes, but that's not what we're talking about Hermione, how long have you been friends with those Slytherins. Are there any other bombshells you would like dropped on me? Perhaps you enjoy having afternoon tea with Snape every evening and trade cooking tips with bloody Umbridge!"

During Harry's rant, Hermione was able to get control over herself and fired back "I don't have to justify myself to you, Harry. I can be friends with whomever I want! I only started spending time with them because of you anyway!"

Hermione had gotten so worked up, she was breathing hard. Unfortunately, her injury was still fresh and very sore and she felt a sharp pain in her chest. She winced and place her hand over the injury and sat down.

Harry's anger vanished instantly over his concern for his best friend.

"Are you ok? What's wrong? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to explode at you like this. I'm having even more trouble controlling my anger since S-Sir...that night. I just...I'm so tired of people I trust keeping things from me." Harry finished in such a plaintive tone of voice and sad, downcast expression on his face, that the wind was taken out of Hermione's sails as well.

"I'm ok, Harry still sore, but Madam Pomfrey is sure that the potions will take care of everything now. What did you mean by the people you trust keeping things from you?"

"Dumbledore." Harry spat. "He knew, Hermione. He knew all year what Voldemort was up to and he didn't tell me. He just kept his distance and brushed me off on Snape. If he had just told me why Voldemort was sending those visions, I would have known not to go. I would have known to try harder at Occlumency, but he decided that I wasn't ready." Harry had worked himself up again and was furiously pacing around the room.

Hermione had remained seated and was following Harry pace back and forth like she was watching a tennis match. "I can't believe that, Harry. He had to have had a good reason for not telling you."

"Yeah, a bloody great reason. He didn't want me asking more questions. He wasn't ready to tell me the...stuff he had kept from me." Harry finished off vaguely. He knew any mention of what Dumbledore had kept from him would force him to tell Hermione the prophecy. He was going to tell her, for sure, he just wasn't ready to acknowledge it yet.

"What hadn't he told you, Harry." Hermione knew that this was what was effecting Harry above and beyond his grief over Sirius' death.

"Please don't ask me that, Hermione. I'm not ready to say it out loud. I promise to tell you, as soon as we see each other again this summer, we will go somewhere private and I will tell you everything. It's just too fresh."

"Now who is the one keeping secrets?" asked Hermione with a raised eyebrow.

Harry glanced at Hermione and ducked his head while scratching the back of his neck in his 'Gosh, I guess I was wrong and I'm awful sorry' pose.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. It wasn't the fact that you had other friends. It was just who those friends were and that I found out from them that

you were hiding something from me. After what happened with Dumbledore, it was too similar and I overreacted. I guess Ron rubbed off on me a bit, there." Harry had a half smile on his face as he finished.

"Sit down, Harry." Harry sat down in a chair directly across from Hermione's and started to relax some.

"It's ok to keep some secrets, Harry. I'm sure there are other things about yourself you haven't told everyone, just like there are still some things about me that I haven't said. You're still my best friend. You're still the person I will come to first with my problems and my good news. It's just that now, I have some people I can go to with the things that you wouldn't want to hear about."

"Yeah, I guess I wouldn't be too much help if you wanted to talk about boys or make-up."

"Honestly, Harry, it's not like when we get together we turn all giggly like Parvati and Lavender. Blaise and Tracey wouldn't want to talk about boys, anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"They're together, Harry. But you absolutely can not say anything about that to anyone. I really shouldn't have told you. If that gets out, it could ruin their lives. Harry? Harry! Did you hear what I just said? Pay attention!"

"Sorry Hermione, but I'm still a fifteen year old boy. You can't tell me something that like and expect me not to have naughty thoughts about it." he said with a quirked eyebrow and a smile twitching at his lips. [You never answered my question, though. How long have you been friends with them?"

"Since third year. When you and Ron weren't talking to me, and I was so overwhelmed by my course load, I was assigned a project with Daphne during our Ancient Runes class. We just continued studying together in private after that. She eventually brought along Blaise and

Tracey. I'm not leaving you for them, Harry. While I am very close to them, you're still my best friend."

"Of course, I'm still your best friend! They didn't save you from a troll. That's a pre-requisite for best friend status, don't you think?"

With that, the two teens burst out laughing. The tension in the room was finally broken, and for the first time in days, Harry felt a bit more like himself. Hermione was elated that Harry was still able to joke and laugh, but she didn't delude herself into thinking that he was better. She would still keep a close eye on him.

"So, what did you tell them? Will you help them?"

Harry sighed, "I told them I'd think about it. I had built up too much anger over the secret to think clearly, and I wanted to verify that they weren't lying about your friendship. I don't trust them. I know you do, and that's a plus in their column, but you've had two and a half years to get to know them that I haven't. I wouldn't even know how to help them, anyway."

"We just need to think of a place for them to stay for the first month of the summer while I'm gone, Harry."

"True, but where is there that is safe enough for someone with Death Eaters after them?"

"Hm, who could we ask that has enough experience being hidden from Voldemort and the Death Eaters?" Hermione asked sarcastically.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. But there are a grand total of four places that Dumbledore has deemed 'safe.' Hogwarts, the Weasley's, Grimmauld Place, and the Dursleys. Hogwarts is out because students aren't allowed here over the summer. The Weasleys are out because Merlin knows what would happen if we forced Ron together with three Slytherins. Grimmauld Place is out until one of us is there because we'd have to ask Dumbledore and none of us trust him right now."

"That just leaves the Dursleys, Harry."

"I know, Hermione, but there is no way. There is no way the Dursleys would allow them to stay, no matter how much I explained. So, they would have to hide in my room the whole time, which is small enough that I barely fit in it myself. Plus, I would have to feed them and I barely get table scraps as it is."

"That's not right, Harry."

"It may not be right, Hermione, but it's just the way it is. They aren't going to change."

"Ok, but what if I had a solution to the other problems?"

"I don't like the idea of spending a month alone with them, myself, but I'd cope. What is your idea?"

"You could use Dobby to expand your room and feed you. I was going to suggest that you use him to feed you, anyway, but...what...why are you looking at me like that, Harry?"

Harry was just staring at Hermione with his mouth open. That is, until he burst out laughing. "Be still my heart, Hermione! What about S.P.E.W.? How did you even come up with this idea?"

Hermione's face lit up like a Christmas tree. "S.P.E.W. Continues, just as strong, Harry. I just, I went to Dobby to ask him about sending you food and other things, and found him wearing all of my hats. We had a long talk about the way house-elves think. Anyway, I'm not giving up on freeing them, it's just going to take longer than I originally planned." Hermione said this very primly while sticking her chin defiantly in the air.

Harry's loud guffaws calmed down to soft chuckles and he asked, "What made you go to Dobby?"

"Well, I didn't want to be cut off from you like last year. So, I thought, if we had a safe delivery method, there would be no reason for Dumbledore to keep us from talking to you. Then, when I was talking to Professor Vector, I saw a house-elf pop in and give her a note.

Nothing could be safer than someone who can deliver a letter instantly."

"I wish we had thought of that last year."

"Me too. So, anyway, let's see if Dobby can do what we are asking of him. Dobby!"

'POP'

"Dobby is here Harry Potter sir's Miss Hermy! What can Dobby be doing for you?" Harry's laughter returned full force at Dobby's name for Hermione, regardless of her scowling at him.

"Hello, Dobby, how are you?"

Harry cursed himself when Dobby started crying and hugging his leg, "Harry Potter sir asks Dobby how he is! Harry Potter sir is the greatest wizard ever!"

"Erm, right, so...we had a question for you, Dobby."

At Dobby's expectant look, and more expectant bouncing Harry continued quickly. "Dobby, you remember my bedroom at the Dursley's?" Dobby acknowledged him with an ear-flapping nod. "Would you be able to expand that room into something that would hold three more people comfortably? Preferably with a separate bathroom? Without setting off the magic detection sensors? I really don't want to go through another trial this summer."

"Oh, yes, Harry Potter, sir. Dobby can be doing all this. House-elf magic different from wizard magic. Dobby set off sensors on purpose." Dobby finished with a sheepish expression.

"That's ok, Dobby, your heart was in the right place." Placated Harry.

"Excellent Dobby, so on top of delivering food and mail, you will expand Harry's bedroom at the Dursleys when he asks you to do so. Can you make it so muggles don't want to enter his room? I take it,

they won't react well if they find magic having been done in their house." Harry snorted while Dobby exclaimed "Dobby can, Miss."

"Very good. Now, for the expansion job we will pay you an extra 10 galleons, on top of the 2 a week you are already receiving. No bargaining here, Dobby. It's only fair." Harry backed Hermione up with a firm nod.

"Thank you, Dobby. I'll see you this summer."

"Well, I guess that's settled. When are you going to tell Daphne, Tracey, and Blaise?"

"I'll find them tomorrow. For now, I just want to go to bed. I'm knackered."

After getting a fitful sleep, plagued by nightmares, in his dorm bed, which he hadn't slept in all week. Harry set about trying to find three Slytherin girls and getting them alone.

Harry watched the Marauder's Map all morning, but at no point did the girls step out of their common room. Not even for breakfast. He eventually lost his patience scribbled a quick note and rushed to the owlery.

After Harry spent the next ten minutes apologizing profusely and begging Hedwig's forgiveness, he sent his note off with a school owl.

Lunch was a raucous affair for most students. Students letting go of the stress that the recently completed tests caused them, friends spending just a little more quality time together because they knew that they were leaving tomorrow.

Harry's mood had shifted once again and he found himself feeling completely removed from it all. He had noticed several people watching him closely. Hermione was natural, it was what she always did when she was concerned about him. Which was most of the time, so he was used to it. Similarly with Dumbledore, although the headmaster's interest was currently grating on Harry's nerves. Harry

didn't even need to look up to feel the glare that Snape was giving him, he also couldn't bring himself to care.

The stares of the random students, containing both awe and fear, was also not something he thought too much about. It had become the status quo in his life for large crowds of people staring at him. Harry did see, out of the corner of his eye, Tracey Davis staring him down, as if she were looking for something. Her inquisitiveness was hidden behind a glare, but Harry knew that was just a show. She was looking for his answer.

"For goodness' sake Tracey, stop glaring at him. It's not like he can just come over and have a chat in the middle of lunch!" exclaimed Blaise in a fierce whisper. "He said he would let us know before dinner, he still has time."

"But what the hell are we going to do if he says no? There are no other options." Tracey fired back.

"Enough, you two, now is neither the time or the place for this discussion."

Just as Daphne had finished her reprimand a nondescript swooped down and offered its leg to her. Daphne took the note and watched the bird fly off again. She quickly glanced at the note, refolded it and started back in on her meal.

At the questioning looks from her friends, she said simply, "Finish your meals and we'll go."

At exactly 5 p.m., the Slytherin Untouchables entered the vacated Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom.

"Ok, we're here, alone just like the note told us to be. Where is he?"

"Accio wands." A disembodied voice called out.

"DAMMIT!" screeched Blaise as, once again, she was rendered mostly defenseless.

Harry chuckled as he took off his invisibility cloak. "You know, I can truly understand now why you would need protection. You can barely protect yourselves."

Just as Blaise was about to snap back a retort, Tracey put a calming hand on her shoulder and asked. "Ok, Potter, you win. We're here. Are you going to help us or not?"

"Yes, I will, but my help will not come free." said Harry flatly, getting down to business.

The girls shifted from foot to foot uneasily, wondering if they had bit off more than they could chew.

"Relax, you're paying me in information. I have recently discovered that I need to know more about pureblood politics than I ever wanted to. If I am to help you, you have to teach me everything you know about that world. Also, I will need a magical oath from each of you not to divulge my secrets to anyone I don't approve of and to not betray me in any way. Deal?"

"Deal." The girls agreed instantly.

"Fine, I'm going to pass you back your wands, one at a time, so you can give me your oaths."

One by one, each girl received their wand and gave their oath.

"Now, how are you going to help us, Potter?" asked Daphne.

"I live at Number four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey. If you need to escape before you go to Hermione's, you come there. I warn you, though. My relatives hate absolutely everything to do with magic. Including me, so you will have to be invisible while you are there."

"There is a park on Magnolia Road. Go there, find somewhere out of sight and call for Dobby the house-elf. Tell him you are there to see me. He'll let me know where you are and I'll come for you. As you can see, I have an invisibility cloak. You'll put it on and we'll sneak you up

to my room. There are blood wards protecting the house, no wizard will be able to harm us there."

"How are we supposed to get to the park?" asked Daphne.

"You three are the smartest people in Slytherin house, known for its cunning. Figure it out yourselves. Goodnight Ladies."

With that final farewell, Harry walked out the door and began aimlessly wandering the halls of Hogwarts once again.

While Harry meandered around the emptied halls of Hogwarts, he allowed his mind to wander back to Sirius for the first time that day. Unfortunately, this brought him right back to his overwhelming depression at not ever being able to see him again.

Just as he was about to turn and walk back towards Gryffindor tower, he ran into Luna Lovegood, who was putting posters up on the notice boards located in the halls.

"Hello, Luna, I thought you'd be at the feast with everyone else."

"Hello, no, I'm just posting messages asking for my possessions back. People tend to take most of them throughout the year."

"What? Why would they take your things?"

"Well, I assume it's because they all think I'm a bit odd. They all call me 'Loony' Lovegood." Luna said matter-of-factly.

"Erm-Luna, you are a bit odd." Harry said fondly, before scowling and saying "But that's no reason to call you Loony or take your things. Would you like some help looking for your stuff?"

"Oh, no, it almost always comes back in the end. Most of it undamaged as well." She said cheerfully. Harry's scowl deepened.

"Why aren't you at the feast, Harry? You seemed a bit preoccupied as you were walking along there. What was on your mind?"

"I was just thinking of...someone." Harry said vaguely.

"It was the man who died at the Ministry, wasn't it? Hermione said he was your godfather and that you were close. I'd imagine you are missing him terribly."

"Yeah, you are saying that like you know how I'm feeling. Have you lost someone before?"

"Yes, my mother. She died in front of me when I was nine. It was a terrible accident while she was experimenting with some spells. She was quite brilliant, you know. But, it's not like we'll never see them again."

"We won't?"

"You heard them, too, you said you did. The voices, just out of range behind the veil. They were there, waiting for us. So, yes, we'll see them again."

Harry waffled between belief and disbelief on this before decided that Luna was too kind to lie about something like this.

"Thank you, Luna. It's good to hear that. Are you sure you don't want help looking for your possessions? I really wouldn't mind."

"Oh, no, I think I'll just go down to the feast and have some pudding. Goodbye Harry."

As Luna started to walk away Harry suddenly called out. "Luna!" when she turned to look at him again, he gave her a soft smile and said "Be sure to look for our compartment on the train tomorrow. I'll be sure to save you some space."

"I'll do that Harry, goodnight."

"Goodnight, Luna."

The two turned in separate directions and walked away. Harry, with a steady gate that became angrier as he went and Luna, with a

beaming smile and slightly watery eyes, result of the validation that yes, she may not be so alone any longer.

Harry reached his destination and knocked resolutely on the Ravenclaw common room door. He knew that there wasn't a password for Ravenclaw, but a riddle that had to be answered.

Sure enough the door spoke, "I pass below the sun, yet make no shadow. What am I?"

Harry thought for a moment, before answering, "The wind."

The door spoke "Enter" as it opened.

Harry walked into the room dominated by high, open windows, bookshelves, and blue and bronze. He moved a chair so that it was directly across from the entrance, cast an engorgio on the notice he had picked up on the way so that it could be seen by everyone, stuck it to the wall, and sat down to wait.

Soon enough, students started filing back into the room from the feast, most talking loudly with their friends, although a hush fell over them as they noticed Harry sitting calmly in front of the notice with a stormy look on his face.

"Potter! What are you doing here? You're not in our house!"

"Brilliant deduction, Roger, no wonder the Sorting Hat put you in Ravenclaw with deductive reasoning like that. I am here because I am calling a Ravenclaw house meeting. I'll continue once," Harry paused as he looked around until he saw a familiar face "Padma tells me that everyone is here."

And he did just that. No matter who spoke to him, he said nothing until Padma let him know that everyone was present.

"Thank you, Padma. Hello, Ravenclaw house, if any of you don't know me, my name is Harry Potter. I have called you all here, because I have some concerns. It has come to my attention" Harry tapped the notice behind him "that the belongings of a friend of mine

have gone mysteriously missing, as they have each year. I am here to let you know that this stops now. You have one hour to make sure that every missing belonging of Luna Lovegood's is returned to her."

"What if they don't?"

Harry gave a cold smile that sent shivers down the spine of everyone who saw it and spoke with a tone that believethat every word he said was true. "If they are not here, undamaged, or replaced with either money or an equal possession, then I will make Fred and George Weasley look tame. And I will focus it completely on your house."

"But that's not fair! We're not all responsible for her stuff getting stolen." begged Terry Boot.

"Isn't that so like the wizarding world? It's not my family Voldemort (he ignored the shivers and shrieks) is attacking, I shouldn't have to do anything. No, you are just as responsible. You knew it was happening and you did nothing to stop it. I'm doing something. One hour. GO!" Harry barked the last word and it sent everyone running.

"Harry, you didn't have to do this." said Luna, quietly.

"I did, Luna, once I knew what was happening, if I did nothing I would be no better than those who wronged you. Friends take care of each other. Now, tell me about the crumple horned snorkacks."

With an appreciative smile, Luna began speaking. The hour passed quickly, with every single possession of Luna's returned to her. Where, with a few spells, summoned her trunk, packed it up, and levitated it back up the stairs behind her after saying goodnight again to Harry.

"Thank you, ladies and Gentlemen of Ravenclaw. This was your only warning. I will not tolerate these attacks on my friends, and Luna Lovegood is a friend. Goodnight."

The next day, as the train was pulling in to King's Cross station, Harry was reflecting a bit on the ride. Thankfully, nothing extraordinary happened. He didn't think he would have been able to take any more

excitement. It was just a quiet calming ride where he spectacularly lost a few games of chess to Ron and Neville, he listened to the gossip of who is dating whom. He one time crush Cho dating Ginny's ex Michael Corner made him realize that with the weight of the world that he was starting to feel the brunt of, Harry really didn't care about things like that much anymore. Although, he did get a bit of a chuckle out of Ginny winding Ron up when she told him she was now dating Dean Thomas.

Harry did see the brief look of thanks that Daphne Greengrass shot him when their eyes met as she was walking past the compartment door.

Harry exited the train and, as always, had a pang of pain to see the joy on the faces of both parents and students as they were reunited. He quickly shook it off and followed his friends through the exit of the platform back into muggle London.

His overwhelming sense of dread ratcheted up a bit more when he saw Remus Lupin, Nymphadora Tonks, Arthur Weasley, and Mad-eye Moody having a quiet, yet seemingly heated discussion with his Uncle Vernon. Harry could almost tell when one of the them spoke a threat because his Uncle's face would go from its angry puce to white before dissolving back to puce.

A bit dazed, yet thankful Harry woodenly said his goodbyes getting a hug and another kiss on the cheek from Hermione, hugs from Mrs. Weasley and Ginny, and handshakes and firm pats on the back from the rest of the group.

Just before Harry was about to turn to leave with the Dursleys, Mad-eye stepped forward and thrust a school bag into Harry's arms. "Dumbledore thought you might like a bit of reading material for the summer. He said it might help you with your task, whatever that means."

A brief flare of anger at the headmaster for not giving him these things to prepare him earlier was squashed and with a curt nod and thank you, Harry turned and walked off towards his summer imprisonment. His sense of foreboding screaming a warning at him

when he saw the looks of loathing on all three faces of his wardens, the Dursleys.

Chapter 3:

Eric Granger pulled his car into his side of the two car garage that was attached to his large, but not showy, two story house. The ride home had been uneventful for the Granger family, plus Luna. Mostly they discussed the school year, staying away from the more serious topics. They all realized that a long chat, somewhere comfortable was going to be needed for that. So, instead, they took the time to start to get to know the curious young witch that was to be in their care for the summer. They stopped for dinner on the way home, so it was a bit later in the evening when they had arrived.

The girl was odd, Eric decided, but not in a bad way. She was inquisitive and obviously intelligent, by the way she discussed school work with his Hermione. But the occasional strange sounding creature that she idly spoke of...what the hell was a crumple horned snorkack anyway? One look in the rear-view mirror told him that Hermione had no idea, either.

Still, this was a friend of Hermione's and he and his wife, Celia, would do their best to make her feel at home.

Eric was brought out of his musings by Luna's serene, yet inquisitive voice. "Oh, you have two cars, is this normal?"

"Pffft, that's not a car, Luna, that's an Aston Martin!" exclaimed Eric proudly while buffing an imagined piece of dirt off the hood with his sleeve.

"Oh? What's the difference between a car and an Aston Martin?" inquired Luna.

"Men." said Celia Granger with a roll of her eyes.

"I'm afraid I don't understand." replied Luna.

"That's ok, Luna. Neither do we. Come on, I'll show you where you'll be staying. We're not leaving until Sunday." said Hermione as she pushed Luna out of the garage and into the tastefully decorated Granger house.

"Once you're done putting your things away, Hermione, why don't the two of you meet us in the Living Room. I'll put some tea on."

Once everyone was settled down with their drinks in the sitting room, the eldest Grangers said in a serious tone of voice "I think it's time, Hermione, that you tell us what is going on at that school."

Luna and Hermione glanced at each other before Hermione started speaking. "Well, you know from what I've told you last summer that the wizard terrorist, Voldemort, has returned."

"Right, you said he was like Hitler and muggles and muggleborn are like the Jews."

"Yes, well, Harry was there when Voldemort returned." Hermione was a little surprised that Luna didn't shudder or shriek. "He was unwillingly a part of the ritual, from what I understand. Harry and Professor Dumbledore tried to warn the Ministry, but Minister Fudge refused to believe them. Instead he started a smear campaign through the Daily Prophet to discredit the both of them. He also had his Senior Undersecretary, Dolores Umbridge, installed as the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. She targeted Harry to try to get him to keep quiet, but Harry refused to be cowed. Fudge started enacting educational decrees which essentially gave Umbridge ultimate power over the school. Once Dumbledore was driven out, she became the Headmistress."

Luna picked up the story at that point. "While this was happening, Voldemort was attacking Harry's mind throughout the year. Harry, apparently, has some form of mental connection to Voldemort that allows Harry to see into Voldemort's mind, but also allows him into Harry's. Voldemort used this connection to plant images of the Department of Mysteries into Harry's head. Eventually, he sent Harry a vision of Harry's godfather getting tortured. Harry, being who he is, tried to save his godfather. Unfortunately, the vision was false and we were led into a trap. Harry got us out of the trap and kept us alive until some associates of Dumbledore were able to come and save us. Including Harry's godfather, who, unfortunately, didn't survive the battle. We don't know much of what went on beyond that point,

except the fact that Professor Dumbledore showed up and he and Harry fought Voldemort in the Atrium of the Ministry. At the end of the battle the Minister and some Aurors showed up and saw Voldemort for themselves and were forced to acknowledge Voldemort's return. This battle is where your daughter was injured."

Eric Granger, who had been following the story with rapt attention asked, "Why didn't Harry ask one of the teachers for help?"

"All of the teachers that Harry would have gone to for help were out of the castle except for one. When Harry tried to let him know what was going on, he didn't acknowledge anything."

As Eric nodded his understanding, Celia Granger continued, "Isn't there some way to protect Harry against Voldemort's mind attacks?"

Hermione answered, "There is, it's called Occlumency, and Harry started taking lessons for it after a vision saved Mr. Weasley's life over Christmas. That's why I went to see him. Harry's lessons did not go well. Professor Snape was forced to teach Harry, but since they hate each other fiercely, Harry was unable to learn from Snape. I'm not sure Snape even tried to teach Harry properly. Harry always came back to the common room tired, irritable and with a massive headache. For all we know, those lessons made it easier for Voldemort."

"I see." said Celia Granger. "So, Hermione, what is to keep us from packing you up and leaving the country?"

Hermione's heart stopped for a moment. She looked wildly between her parents. Panic began to set in as she realized that they weren't joking.

"Please, Mum, Dad, you've always taught me to fight for what I believe in. I believe in Harry and our cause. Let me fight for them."

"Leaving the country would only keep you safe for a little longer, if Voldemort wins. He is looking to take over the world and completely destroy the muggles and muggleborn. Hermione will have a better chance of surviving here, now, than somewhere else, later."

"We've already decided to let you stay, if you wanted. We just wanted to know that you were staying for the right reason. Now, what is being done to protect you?"

"Protection! I almost forgot! Harry had the Headmaster make portkeys for the three of us. He didn't know that Luna would be with us at the time, but one of us just needs to grab her, and she'll be taken with us. While wearing one of these bracelets, just say 'Snuffle's house' to activate it and it will take you to a safe house that Harry owns. It's the same place I went last summer."

Mr. and Mrs. Granger each put on one of the leather bracelets.

"We'll have to remember to thank Harry for being so thoughtful."

"Now, onto more pleasant things. Luna do you think you have appropriate beach wear?"

"What do you mean?"

"Shorts, tank tops, swimsuits. That sort of thing."

"Oh, no, I just have what I could find of my mother's. I don't know that it will fit in very well, but I'm quite used to being looked at as odd." replied Luna, still serenely as ever.

"Well, then, we'll just have to take you to a great muggle mainstay. The shopping mall. It's gotten quite late, now, so off to bed with you. You'll need your energy for shopping tomorrow!"

After saying goodnight all four occupants of the house went upstairs to their rooms, Luna stayed in one of the two guest rooms, for a night of peaceful sleep.

Harry's trip home, while no more eventful was much less pleasant. Harry was, as usual, squished into the back seat next to his whale of a cousin who was taking up most of the space. He could tell his Uncle was not taking well to the threats made by the well-intentioned wizards at the station by the puce color his face had taken as well

and the steady, quick thumping in the vein on his forehead. Harry also, occasionally, caught Vernon's beady eyes glancing hatefully at him in the rear-view mirror. Harry was very glad that he and Hermione had enlisted Dobby's help this summer, because from the looks he was getting, he was sure that food would be scarce.

When the car finally pulled into Number four, Dudley was out of the car and down the street faster than Harry had ever seen him move, calling back that he was off to have 'tea' with his friends. Harry wondered if the ten-year-olds of the neighborhood were prepared.

His Uncle Vernon turned in his seat and said, "Get your freak crap up to your room and stay there. I don't want to hear a sound from you for the rest of the night. You'll have breakfast ready for us in the morning and I'll have a list of chores for you to complete."

With that the horse and the walrus exited the car and made their way inside the house, even as Harry struggled with his belongings. The reason for Harry's sense of dread became abundantly clear when Vernon opened the door. The familiar barking sound of Vernon's sister's dog Ripper could clearly be heard from inside the house and sent chills down Harry's spine.

"Marge is here, bloody brilliant. I wonder if I'll be able to keep from blowing her up again. I don't think the Minister will be as accommodating this time." With a great sigh and a grunt he heaved his trunk into the air and trudged his way into the house and up the stairs before anyone could say anything to him.

He opened his window and Hedwig's cage and told his familiar "You might as well get out as much as you can, girl. No reason for both of us to be stuck in this hellhole."

The owl flew to his shoulder and bumped Harry's head with hers affectionately before launching herself out the window to stretch her wings and perhaps catch some dinner.

Harry looked around the room that was largely unchanged from when he was there last summer. The bed looked just as flat, yet lumpy. The

desk, chair, and wardrobe looked just as broken down, but there seemed to be more of Dudley's old, broken toys laying around.

Harry unpacked his trunk, carefully hiding his most valued possessions, namely his invisibility cloak and his photo album, under the loose floorboard beneath his bed. He hung up his muggle clothes in the wardrobe and repacked his trunk so that the books were on the top as to be more easily accessible. He knew that, since he had just finished his O.W.L.s, and he didn't know which classes he was going to be taking next year, he did not have any homework to do. He figured that, with his newly found destiny hanging over his head, he might want to spend a bit more time studying this summer than he had in his past. This reminded him of the schoolbag that Moody had given to him just before he had left with the Dursleys.

Harry opened the bag and saw it packed with books. Mostly books on defense, though there were a couple of books on meditation and centering oneself. The books on meditation reminded Harry of his failed Occlumency lessons with Snape and rage filled him at that thought. Harry chucked the books aside and threw himself down on his bed to brood as he had done most of the last week.

He didn't know how much time had passed before the exhaustion of missing so much sleep since beginning to study for his O.W.L.s claimed him. For the first time since the battle at the Ministry, Harry slept long enough to dream. Harry's dreams were now filled with not only with green lights, his mother's screams, tombstones and bodies emerging from boiling cauldrons, but now had a steady rotation of purple flames and fluttering veils. In the distance in his dreams, Harry could feel a presence. It was large and angry, but Harry could also tell that that feeling was because it was trapped. The presence distracted Harry from the horrors that were occurring in his nightmares, but when he tried getting closer to it, he started and woke up covered in sweat. He also felt as if a million ants were crawling under his skin.

He quickly realized why he was pulled so abruptly from his dreams. Vernon and his sister, Marge, were each outside his door pounding and hollering for Harry to shut up. When Harry opened his mouth to retort, he discovered his throat was scratchy and felt strained. He

must have been screaming in his sleep again. Unfortunately, he couldn't use his wand to cast a silencing charm around his room like he did at school around his bed after waking up his dorm mates.

Harry staggered out of bed and answered the door where he was promptly rapped on the nose with his Aunt's cane as she had moved to knock on his door again but hadn't noticed that Harry had opened it. Vernon continued his tirade completely unconcerned that Harry was grimacing in pain even as he doubled over grabbing his nose.

"What the hell are you on about screaming like a banshee in the dead of night!" Vernon screamed like a banshee.

"I'm sorry, I was having a nightmare."

"Who bloody cares if you were having a nightmare or not! Good people are trying to sleep and you are keeping them awake! I don't understand why you keep him here Vernon, you should have tossed him out on the street where he belongs long ago!"

"It's still an option if you don't keep the ruddy noise down, boy!"

With that, Vernon slammed the door in Harry's face. Harry heard Vernon locking all of the locks on his door, making him a prisoner once again. Harry sighed and looked around, absently rubbing his arms as the ants-under-the-skin feeling hadn't receded yet.

"Well, I'm not going back to sleep tonight." So Harry sat and pulled out one of the defense books that was given to him and began to read. He skipped over the first few chapters, noting that he had already taught a majority of those spells to the DA this past year. As he read through the book, he held his wand in his hand and practiced the wand movements. He was careful not to accidentally fire off any curses, as it would not only get him expelled, but it would cause a lot of damage as the spells he was looking at were much more aggressive than he had learned before.

Before Harry knew it, the sun was up and Aunt Marge was hammering on his door to "get your worthless hide downstairs and cook the decent people of the house some breakfast."

Harry took a few moments to collect himself. He knew he could show no weakness in front of these people or they would pounce on it like a starving hyena on an injured calf. So, he did what he could and locked all emotion away, hardening himself to the outside world and the abuse he knew was coming.

Harry walked into the kitchen and internally heaved a large sigh. Aunt Marge and Uncle Vernon were sitting at the table with Ripper growling at him from beside Marge's legs. Aunt Petunia and Dudley were still elsewhere in the house. Harry got out the bacon and eggs and all the pots and pans that he would need to cook and began frying up heaping amounts of breakfast for other people to eat.

'THWACK'

"Stand up straight, boy, I'll not have you slouching about in my brother's house!" Marge sniped after hitting Harry rather roughly in the small of the back with her cane. Harry merely grunted on the impact and straightened his back as best he could, seeing as he wasn't slouching in the first place.

"Oh, no, you'll be showing proper manners in this house, while I'm here. I'll make sure your chores are done properly. None of the half-arsed work that you're probably used to will be done around here! You're going to earn your place!" Marge Dursley continued ranting. Punctuating her points with more jabs and hits from her cane.

When Harry turned around to serve the breakfast he had just cooked, he could see the smirk on Vernon's face, clearly enjoying what was happening to Harry.

Harry served out five dishes and was just about to sit down to eat when Marge snatched his dish from under his fork and placed it in front of Ripper on the floor. "I'll have no free-loading in this house, either! If you want to eat, you'll earn it. I haven't seen you do a lick of work yet, so you'll not be getting any food."

Harry looked from face to face, seeing the lack of concern from his Aunt Petunia, the smirk from his Uncle Vernon. Dudley's face couldn't be seen because he was currently shoveling food in his mouth fast enough to put even Ron to shame.

"Fine. I'll be in my room." Harry stood to leave when Marge whacked him on the side of her knee with her cane, again.

"You weren't dismissed yet, boy! Vernon, where is that list of chores you were going to give him? Hand it here, I'll supervise him, make sure everything is done right. And he'll not be getting dinner, either, if everything on that list isn't done."

"Of course, Marge, dear. I have have it here. I just know you'll set this boy right in no time. If you can't do it, no one can." Vernon finished with a snarl.

"That's right! You were much too soft on him when he was growing up. It may be too late, but I'll do my best to have him trained by the end of summer. Now, upstairs with you boy. Get yourself cleaned up before you start with the flower beds...Dismissed." She added with a nod when Harry hadn't moved yet.

Harry rushed up the stairs to get away from the woman for a few precious minutes, but sagged in relief when he entered his room and saw a plate of eggs, sausage, toast, and a glass of pumpkin juice waiting for him on his desk. "Thanks, Dobby" Harry said to the air as he ate as quickly as possible while changing his clothes. He didn't bother showering because he knew that he would just be getting sweaty and dirty all over again in a few minutes. Harry exited his room after putting on some of his tatter clothing and leaving a few pieces of sausages for Hedwig.

What followed was one of the more brutal and demeaning days Harry had ever known. He worked as quickly and quietly through every item on the long list of chores while listening to Marge declaiming how useless and horrible he was. Smacking him with her cane anytime she thought she saw a disrespectful look, or a job not being done correctly. Which was quite a few times.

Harry cooked a meal that night for the Dursleys that could have put Molly Weasley to shame in its quantity. Of course, once he was finished with the dishes, he was sent to his room with two pieces of stale bread and a half of a glass of water. "You eat what you earn, boy!" Exclaimed Marge Dursley.

Of course, when he got back to his room, he had a delicious meal waiting for him. "Dobby's gonna get a raise, if I have anything to say about it." Harry said to himself as he tucked in to his well-earned meal.

The next two weeks went much the same. Harry got little to no sleep each night, dreaming each time of purple flames, green flashes, and veils, whilst trying to search out that strange trapped creature. Each night he would get a little closer and would wake up with his skin tingling and a strange sort of energy that seemed to surround him. While awake at night, he poured through each of the text books, as well as his parents' journals. He had decided to save Sirius' journal until after his birthday, partially because that was when Sirius had said he would get it in his letter, but also because he wanted something to look forward to.

The information provided in his mother's journal was thought-provoking at the least. Her thoughts on how magic worked rung true with Harry. She theorized that magic came down to concentration on the desired result, focusing on bringing the magic out of a person's core, and willing the magic to produce the desired result. Wand movements and incantations were mostly used to provide the correct concentration and focus for the wizard or witch. Many times, while reading his mother's journal, Harry would stop and think 'My mother was a genius!' That thought often filled him with pride, love, and the influence to study just a bit harder. He also often thought that Hermione would absolutely love reading this journal.

Harry also delighted in reading the parts of the journal detailing her thoughts and feelings on her personal life. He was fascinated with how her description of James Potter turned from 'unbearable toerag' to 'a sweet, loving man.' He was tempted to skip over the parts of the journal that discussed their sex life, but realized that this was as close

to 'the Talk' that he was going to get. He still remembered when Ron came back pale-faced and jittery after Mr. Weasley had pulled him aside for a solid hour to deliver 'the Talk' just before fourth year. Ron never spoke of that again.

Harry was horrified as he read how much sex actually hurt his mother, at first. He was determined to make his first time with a girl as pleasurable as possible for her. Of course, as he allowed his mind to wander a bit, he was unsure if he was going to worry about a girlfriend at the moment. He knew, with Voldemort hunting him, no girl would be safe as his girlfriend. He also knew that he wouldn't be able to pay, what his mother deemed, 'the proper amount of attention' to whomever he dated with the amount of training he was planning. So, then and there, he decided to shelve the idea of a girlfriend until after the war. That is, if he survived, which as he thought more and more about it wasn't very likely.

His father's journal contained mostly ideas and thought processes on transfiguration, which caused Harry to wish he had had this journal before the O.W.L.s as it would have helped him tremendously. It also gave him his father's perspective on life, which, if anyone were to ask Harry would have consisted over playing pranks with his friends, playing Quidditch and pining over Lily Evans. It also had detailed notes on the process which James used to turn himself into an Animagus. Harry saw that it was a difficult, painful, and time consuming path and was unsure as to whether or not he wanted to go through with it. He decided to shelve that topic until later.

Possibly the most important facts he gleaned from his parents' writings were how happy they were when they found his mother was pregnant, how impatient they were for him to be born, and once he was born; how much they loved him. It was still an abstract feeling, since he had no practical experience on the matter. But, it was still nice to know, on an intellectual level at least, that he was loved.

The books on meditation helped Harry greatly during those first two weeks. The ability to center himself and clear away his emotions allowed him to not blow up Aunt Marge, again. He knew it wasn't occlumency, as he still got the occasional twinge of pain from his scar, but at least he wouldn't be so angry and impossible to deal with this

year. He figured he owed Hermione and Ron medals for dealing with him last year. If not medals, then at least sincere apologies.

Harry had also continued the exercises that Oliver Wood had taught him during his third year. He had done them religiously every day during the school year. The results were just hidden under the monstrously baggy clothes. Not that Harry would think so, but his body was enough to turn anyone's head. In Harry's mind he was still just the tiny, underfed weakling from his first year, though.

He occasionally wondered how his friends were doing. He knew that Hermione and Luna had left for vacation already. The letter saying they were leaving, and detailing Luna's introduction to the shopping mall had come just a couple of days after arriving home. Harry smiled at his memory of Hermione's description of Luna 'Her eyes were so huge; trying to take everything in at once, much like us when we were entering Hogwarts. Mum thought they were going to pop right out of their sockets.'

He'd only had a few short letters from Ron, Ginny, and Neville. He hadn't really expected much, though. Ron wasn't a big letter-writer and when he did write, it was mostly complaining that he was bored and he was still locked out of any and all Order meetings. Ginny and Neville hadn't ever written to him before, so their letters were short and awkward. Mostly talking about Quidditch and classes, respectively. He couldn't think of what to write to them, either. He realized he couldn't write 'Hey, I've got a bruise on my thigh that looks like Snape's nose if you squint at it.' So, he just answered any questions they had and sent the letters along with Dobby. He knew, now, that he wasn't being watched like he was last year. It was either that, or the Order really didn't care about what was happening to him, and that just didn't mesh with the warning that was given to the Dursleys.

That was alright to Harry, especially if the three Slytherin Untouchables were going to show up.

'POP'

Harry spun around, pointing his wand at the intruder, until he noticed it was Dobby.

"Sorry, Dobby, you startled me, again. You would think I'd be used to it by now. How are you doing today?" Harry had lots of practice lacing his words with feeling and emotions that he just wasn't feeling anymore.

"Dobby is fine, Harry Potter, sir. Is everything to your liking?"

"Yes, Dobby, everything is great. Thank you so much for doing this. You are a life-saver."

Dobby nearly wet himself in joy at the praise given.

"Dobby is here to tell Harry Potter that 'the snakes is being in the garden.' They is hiding in the bushes." Harry laughed a little bit at that. He had been a bit loopy from sleep deprivation and decided that they needed a code-phrase for when the Slytherins showed up.

"Already? Alright, Dobby. Could you stay here and enlarge the room as we discussed? I think a one-way silencing charm would be in order, as well."

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir!"

Harry then grabbed his invisibility cloak, tossed it on and stole out of the house. He then hurried as fast as he could, while staying hidden, to the park. He found the bushes the girls were hiding in at the far end of the park. They had chosen well. He eased in behind them before taking off the cloak and greeting them, "Hello ladies, have a nice trip?"

"Potter, dear Merlin, you nearly gave me heart failure!" hissed Blaise while the other two merely jumped.

"Constant Vigilance, Zabini. How was your trip here? Did you get away ok? Are any of you hurt?"

"What's with the sudden concern, Potter?" asked Tracey with an elegantly arched eyebrow.

"I'm trying, here, alright? I promised that I'd keep you safe, and I'm a man of my word. Now, did you bring anything with you?" Harry fired back a bit sharply.

Chastised, Tracey deferred to Daphne, "We have everything we own. We had one of Blaise's house elves shrink it all down. Our hope that the house elf you hired will be able to put them to put them back."

"Well then, you lot get under the cloak and follow me. Keep quiet and no one will know you are here."

While Harry was leading the Slytherins through Little Whinging, they got a good look at where Harry grew up. They were amazed at how standard and boring everything was. Each house looked almost the same as the last. Harry finally turned toward one of the houses that looked exactly like the others . paused before they reached the front door and turned his head to say, "I don't know if my relatives are still awake or not. No matter what happens, I want you to go straight up the stairs and into my room. It's at the top of the stairs and has a lot of locks on the door. You can't miss it. Oh, skip over the fifth step from the bottom. It creaks."

Harry opened the door, and as soon as he did, he heard his Aunt Marge bellow "BOY! Come in here, NOW!"

Harry's shoulders slumped slightly, before standing back up straight and marching into the kitchen. Tracey, Daphne, and Blaise all looked at each other with raised eyebrows, before doing as Harry asked and went upstairs and into the room with all the locks on it. They also noticed the cat flap, which garnered another round of disbelieving looks. They were completely astonished that the hero of the wizarding world, the Gryffindor Golden Boy, could live like this. And that was before they heard the yelling.

"We didn't give you permission to leave the house, boy!"

"..."

"Don't talk back to your Uncle like that, he took you in out of the goodness of his heart! He deserves your respect! Now, because of your impertinence, you've given up your meals for tomorrow and doubled your chores."

"..."

"Good, now get to your room, I don't want to see you until you make breakfast tomorrow, you little freak!"

They heard nothing else until Harry entered the room. It was the first time since Hogwarts that they had gotten a good look at him as it was rather dark outside. His face was pale and his eyes were bloodshot and had dark circles around them. His shoulders were tense and he moved as if his whole body hurt. His body language was screaming 'I'm overstressed and ready to snap.'

"Potter...Harry, are you alright?" Tracey asked, quietly.

"I'm fine." Harry answered absently, as if it were a token response to that question. Which it was. He was clearly lost in his thoughts.

The Slytherins all just stood awkwardly, staring at each other until Harry seemed to explode out of his trance and into motion.

"Welcome to my own personal hell. I'm assuming that you'll be staying with me for the next two weeks until Hermione gets home. I've asked Dobby to expand this room to make your stay here as comfortable as possible in exchange for your knowledge of pureblood traditions and laws. Maybe, while this is happening, I'll find out why Hermione thinks so highly of you. For now, let's see what Dobby has done. Dobby!"

When the excitable house elf popped into the room, Harry kindly asked him to show them what he had accomplished. Dobby made a motion for them to follow him through the wardrobe door. Harry stepped into a room that held the warmth of the Gryffindor common room, but was decorated in Slytherin colors. There were four doors attached to the common room, other than the door they entered from.

The common room had plush couches, large tables and overstuffed chairs spread around the room. Jaws dropped all around. "You've really outdone yourself, Dobby, thank you. I think I'll add another five galleons to your pay for this. Don't argue, Dobby, you earned it. Did you place the one-way silencing charms up like I asked?"

"Oh, yes, Harry Potter sir!"

"Excellent, Dobby. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Harry Potter, sir asks if he can help Dobby? Harry Potter is greatest wizard alive." Dobby said as he burst into tears. Harry just crouched down and patted the elf on his shoulders.

"Daphne, Tracey, Blaise, why don't the three of you choose your rooms. Dobby will be there to resize your possessions?" When Dobby nodded, Harry continued. "I'll be in my room, if you need me. Goodnight."

After Harry had left and the three women had chosen their rooms and put away their things, they met back in the common room and sat in uncomfortable silence.

"Did you see him? He looked like he was ready to crack." blurted out Daphne. "What the hell is his life like here?"

"I don't know, Daph, but I think we're going to find out." answered Tracey with a worried glance at the wardrobe door.

Chapter 4:

grrrrrrr

'Not Harry!'

Grrrrrraaa

'Kill the spare'

GRRRAAA

'Petrificus Totalus. Well done, Har-'

RRRAAAAAAAWWRRRR

Finally, Harry was able to break out of the dream cycle that he entered into every time his head hit his pillow. The scene he was reliving froze with Hermione's mouth locked in the surprised 'Oh' that Harry always dreaded seeing.

The roar of whatever monster was lurking in the depths of Harry's mind, for that's what Harry recognized this was, still echoed.

Harry followed the echo to the origin, moving much quicker now than he had when he first experienced this. He knew that, while this monster was dangerous, it wasn't dangerous to him. It had a familiarity to it that both calmed and excited Harry. He knew he was getting closer to the source as he ran deeper and deeper into his own mind.

He was now in a large, wooded valley. It was dark and ominous. It was the place of his worst memories and foulest emotions. His hatred and fear lived here. It was a vast forest. Harry focused, not on his surroundings, but on the source of the ever-present growling and roaring. He had made that mistake before. One of the first times through this section of his mind he stopped to look around. He then had woken up sweaty, shaking and filled with a murderous rage that took him the rest of the night to work his way out of.

Harry also realized, now, that time had no meaning here. He could spend as long as weeks or as short as seconds in his mind and only a few short hours would have passed in the outside world. He wondered how long he could stay in here if his tortured subconscious could actually allow him to get a full night's sleep.

He was following a river bed now. It looked to be wide and deep. Larger and deeper than any river he had ever seen or heard of before. If this river was flowing full, he imagined it would make the Nile of Egypt look like a trickle. But, it wasn't flowing full. There was barely a third of the strange-looking water flowing down it. Harry was traveling upstream, but he still noticed that the liquid flowing down this massive riverbed, occasionally breaking off into smaller rivers and streams flowing away from the larger stream, was a glowing, shimmering rainbow of colors.

Harry felt himself getting closer to the edge of this horrible forest. He burst out from the darkened tree line onto a small glade that at the foot of a series of hills that climbed higher and higher. When he reached the apex of the hills, he was looking into a deep ravine. This ravine was where the river was being fed from. He could see numerous other riverbeds, just as large, leading away from it. In the center, though, was where his attention was focused. A great beast appeared, but it was not like anything he had ever seen before. Its shape was forever changing, and it was the same color as the rivers that flowed out from it. The reason it was so enraged, the reason that the rivers were choked off was because the beast was covered, from top to bottom, in a black, tar like substance that radiated evil.

Harry realized, at that very moment, what he was seeing. It was his magic, or at least the mental manifestation of his magical core. He also knew instinctively that the tar like substance that had his core trapped was what was left over when Voldemort's killing curse rebounded off of him. Harry went to move closer to help, but was pulled out of his dream by his Aunt Petunia hammering on his door.

Harry woke with a start, once again to the feeling of a million ants crawling under his skin. He knew now that this was his magic trying to break free of its bonds. He didn't know what was causing this reaction now, but chalked it up to an after-effect of his would-be possession at

the Ministry. Perhaps Voldemort's attempt to control Harry and his magic caused the tar's hold on his magic to lessen. Either way, he was just glad it was lessening.

"You need to get up now, boy! Your Uncle is going into work early today and he'll need his breakfast ready. Hurry up!" snapped Aunt Petunia through the door before she walked down the stairs.

Harry peeled off the pages of the transfiguration text book that were stuck to his face with drool.

"What was that, Potter?" asked Tracey as she poked her head out of the wardrobe door.

"My wake up call. Don't worry about it, I've just got to start my chores for today. Dobby should have breakfast ready in an hour or so. You're free to do whatever you want, today. The cloak is under the loose floorboard under my bed. Just don't get caught. I'll be busy until after dinner. We can talk then."

"Alright," said a perplexed Tracey as Harry waved and left the room.

Tracey retreated back into the magically made common room where the other two refugees were waiting.

"What did he say Trace?" Asked Blaise from her seat across the room.

"He said it was his wake up call. Breakfast should be ready in an hour. He also said that we are free to do whatever we wanted, so long as we don't get caught. Even told me where his invisibility cloak is. This is not how I expected this to go."

"I know, from what Professor Snape told us, I thought Potter would be living in some palace being waited on hand and foot. I also thought we'd have to give up much more than what he is asking. I do find myself curious, though, as to what his normal day is like for him during the summer. I'm going to take the cloak and follow him around today, where is it?" Asked Daphne as she stood to leave the room.

"Loose floorboard under his bed. Be careful, we can't get caught."
Replied Tracey

Daphne left their rooms and got the cloak from under Harry's bed. She was admittedly curious about the photo album and stack of letters that was also hidden there, but decided to ask about that later. After listening at the door for several moments, she slipped the cloak on and crept out of the door and down the stairs. Luckily for her, the kitchen door was open. She walked in and observed from a corner.

She was amazed at Harry's cooking abilities.

She was appalled at the Dursleys' eating habits.

Rage filled her at the verbal abuse that was casually thrown Harry's way.

She was astonished at how he just took it without batting an eye, although one look in those startlingly green eyes and she knew how much it affected him. The raw pain and anger there almost took her breath away.

"What chores does the boy have today, Vernon?"

"He needs to clean out the attic, the garage, and his old room, and take all of the rubbish out for the trash men to pick up in the morning."

Daphne didn't understand why Harry paused mid-step for just a moment at the mention of his old room. She didn't think the house had any unused bedrooms.

"Fine, I'm going to change, then I'll get to work." Harry said as he dodged quickly out of the reach of Marge's cane.

Daphne decided to wait at the bottom of the stairs for Harry to come back down.

Harry thanked Dobby again, just like every other day, as he shoveled down what breakfast he could as he changed clothes. He paused

before exiting his room again and looked at the wardrobe door. He popped his head in after quickly knocking.

Blaise and Tracey quickly sprung apart and began blushing. "Erm," started a furiously blushing Harry, "I was going to tell you to check out any of the books in my room in case you got bored, but I guess that won't be a problem. The offer still stands, just, please don't touch S-Sirius' journal. I haven't read that one yet and I want to be the first. I'll see you after dinner." With that, Harry bolted out of the room, inconspicuously adjusting the front of his pants.

He rushed back downstairs, narrowly avoiding a collision with Daphne, and headed out to the garage to start his work. This day went much the same as any others. He worked as hard and as fast as he could, while Marge barked insults and attempted to swipe at him with her cane. Harry noticed, partway through the first week that Marge was often too lazy to try and strike him again after a miss, so he began dodging. He wasn't very good, at first. She stuck him on the first shot most times. As the days progressed, he got better and better. Now, he was able to dodge more than half of the swings.

Daphne watched Harry all day as he kept his head down and his mouth shut while he worked and worked. The opinion given to her and all other Slytherins by their head of house of the pampered prince was shattered quickly and completely. She saw that he was considered lower than the lowest house elf and was treated the same. His care and concern for Dobby and other house elves was suddenly explained. Her astonishment reached its apex when she found out what his 'old room' was. The fact that the hero of the wizarding world grew up in a bloody cupboard caused her to gasp and quietly run up the stairs.

Tracey and Blaise were startled when Daphne burst into the common room and angrily threw the invisibility cloak to the side.

"Those people are monsters and Snape is an arsehole!" Spat Daphne.

"What do you mean Daph? What did you see?" Asked Tracey

"A cupboard, he grew up in a bloody cupboard! Hermione never mentioned anything like that!"

"That's because Hermione never knew." Replied Harry's soft voice from behind her. "I didn't want anyone to know. It's not exactly a happy memory."

"I'm sorry, I just wanted to know what your life was like here. To see if it was anything what like Professor Snape told us."

With a raised eyebrow, Harry said in an amused voice "It's pretty safe to assume that whatever Snape says about me is a blatant lie. He hates me because of who my father was and will never accept that I'm not him."

"Right, we'll uh, we'll keep that in mind." Replied Blaise.

"Why did you let us have use of your cloak?" Asked Tracey

"Listen," Harry started as he ran his hands through his hair, "I promised to protect you, and I'm going to keep my word on that. We all agreed that this was the safest place for you to be until Hermione is ready for you. I'm not going to keep you locked up like some prisoners. I know what that is like, you saw the locks outside my door, it's not fun. I also know that you lot are smart enough to not get yourselves caught if you do decide to take a walk. I know you are trusting me to protect you, but I'm also trusting you to protect yourselves."

"Thank you, we really appreciate this." Said Daphne with real emotion in her voice.

"No problem." Harry said awkwardly. He was still unable to deal with other's emotions. "Anyway, Dobby usually has dinner ready around now, so I'll leave you to it."

After a quick, silent conversation, Tracey called out, "Wait! Why don't you stay and eat with us in here? We could get to know each other a little better..."

Harry hesitated a moment before he turned back to the girls and said "You know what? You're right, I'd like that. Just let me get showered and changed and I'll be back with you."

What followed was, and Harry would admit this freely, the most pleasant dinner and conversation that he had ever had at Number Four.

The girls talked about themselves and how they were raised. Tracey was pampered a bit, she had nannies that showered her with love and affection. It was why she was the most gentle and empathetic of the group. Blaise had the shortest temper and was more closed off than the others because of the way she had to protect herself from her two older brothers. She said they were like the Weasley twins, but much more malicious and vicious in their attempts. They had transferred to Durmstrang after their second year because they were not learning what they wanted to at Hogwarts, namely darker magic. The two girls openly admitted their relationship to Harry who, while turning beet red said "Yeah, I kind of guessed after walking in on you two, earlier."

They had been friends with each other and Daphne since first year, but had only started trying to see each other that way during this year. Their personalities set each other off nicely. Harry's response was, "Whatever makes you happy; I'm not one to judge."

Daphne was the most independent of all three because her parents mostly left her to her own devices. They were often out of the country on some business trip or another and could only occasionally take her with them. Harry could respect that, having been left alone most of his life as well.

They also told him about their early years at Hogwarts and Draco's growing pains as he tried to establish dominance in the Slytherin political power structure. Harry especially found enjoyable the debacles that only the name of Draco's father had saved him from.

With a start, Harry realized it was close to midnight, so he bid the girls sweet dreams and strolled back into his own room. His heart was just a touch lighter than it had been in the weeks since the death of his

godfather. He wasn't tired yet as he hadn't been actually falling asleep before three am any other night since he had been back in Surrey, so he opened his transfiguration book back to the page he had fallen asleep on last night and began studying again.

Daphne awoke late that night to the sound of moaning and she thought to herself, "Bloody hell! Are those two at it again!? I'm amazed they haven't worn their fingers down to nubs!" She then realized that it wasn't a female voice moaning, and it wasn't in pleasure. Daphne decided to check out what was wrong with Harry, so she climbed out of her bed, slipped on her robe and walked through her door into the common room. She saw Tracey half way to the wardrobe door and Blaise not far behind her.

"How long has he been like this?" Daphne asked

"Not long, he just woke us up as well," said Blaise as she passed into the other room behind Tracey.

The three girls were standing beside Harry's bed as he tossed and turned and moaned in his sleep.

"I think he's having a nightmare."

"Brilliant deduction, Tracey, what do we do about it?" snarked Blaise

"Should we wake him up?" Asked Tracey

"I'm not doing it. You saw how jumpy he was when we snuck up on him. Who knows what he'll do if we wake him up," replied Blaise.

Tracey just shook her head, still staring at Harry as he tossed and turned and moaned on the bed.

"Cowards." spat Daphne as she turned and knelt beside Harry's head. She reached her hand out to brush his hair away from his face, but he instinctively shied away from the contact. Daphne dropped her hand and leaned in as close as possible to Harry's ear and, with as soft and pleasant voice, whispered in his ear.

"Potter...Harry, it's time to wake up, now. Come back to us, Harry, we're here for you. Come on, now, it's time to wake up."

As she was whispering, Harry stopped thrashing around and moaning. He slowly opened his eyes and looked directly into the strange light purple color of Daphne's eyes. Daphne gasped at the intensity and power held behind his emerald eyes. Harry reacted first, squinting around the room.

"What's happening, is everything ok?" Harry sat up quickly and grabbed his glasses off of the pillow where his head had just been.

"Nothing is wrong, don't worry. You woke us up and we wanted to see if you were ok," replied Tracey in a voice that was just as soft and caring as Daphne's.

"Oh," Harry flushed and looked at his feet. "Sorry about that. I didn't want Dobby to put a silencing charm on your door so you could hear if anyone were in my room and I wanted to be able to hear if you needed my help. I haven't woken anyone up since my first night back."

"No, don't apologize, it's alright. We're just worried about you is all. Were you having a nightmare?" Asked Blaise.

"Yeah, it's nothing to worry about, though. It's nothing new. I'm actually surprised I fell asleep tonight. I haven't slept two nights in a row since...since the Ministry, said Harry, while rubbing the back of his neck.

"What were your nightmares about? They sounded awful," asked Daphne, who was now sitting on the bed next to Harry. Tracey sat in the desk chair and Blaise sat on the desk.

"Oh, you know, the usual. My parents dying, Cedric dying, Voldemort's resurrection, Hermione getting hit by that curse, Sirius dying."

The girls looked horrified as they began to realize what Harry had lived through.

"Y-you remember what happened to your parents?" Whispered Blaise.

"Yeah, well, you remember me fainting from the dementors during third year? You must have, I can't imagine Malfoy didn't bring that up in the common room."

"He did, throughout most of that year," replied Tracey.

"Yeah, well, the reason I fainted was because they make me relive the memory of my parents being killed by Voldemort. It's why I learned the Patronus Charm. I hate feeling weak. Anyway, it's still quite late, why don't you lot go back to bed. I won't wake you again tonight."

"We can stay and talk as long as you want," Daphne said softly. "We can always catch up on sleep during the day tomorrow. Not like we'll have anything better to do." Daphne's statement was met by nods from the other two girls, but a yawn from Tracey let Harry know how tired they still were.

"No, it's alright. I'll be fine. I have some reading to do and some letters to reply to. You lot go on back to bed. Thank you for the offer, though. It really does mean a lot." Harry ended with the first real smile any of the girls had ever seen from him. "Go on, sleep in as long as you want. We can start our pureblood lessons tomorrow at dinner. Goodnight, ladies." Harry ushered the girls back through the wardrobe door.

He spent the rest of the night reading, writing letters, and practicing his meditation.

The next day went much like every day had for the past two weeks, only this time, Blaise was the one to follow him around under the invisibility cloak.

When he finally went back into the girls' common room for dinner that night, he had an angry blond waiting for him.

"Why do you let them get away with that crap? Why haven't you done anything about it?" Blaise spat.

With a raised eyebrow Harry replied "Good evening, ladies, how was your day? See anything interesting?"

"Answer me, Potter!"

"What would you have me do, Zabini?" Harry angrily retorted, "Hex them? They'd have it reversed, I'd be brought back in front of the Wizengamot for underage use and breaking the Statute of Secrecy and then I'd be firmly under the Minister's thumb, Marge would be Obliviated, again, and I'd be right back here for my protection. Or maybe a prank from the Weasley twins? They'd have it reversed, Marge would be Obliviated and I'd have to suffer through a guilt trip from Dumbledore while having a watch put on me to make sure I don't do it again. I can do nothing, at least not yet. Once I'm of age, and the war is over, then I can have my revenge. Until then, I'll stay here, and pay my penance."

Blaise was left gobsmacked and contrite after Harry's rant. She opened her mouth to apologize, but Harry cut her off in a much softer voice. "I appreciate your concern, I really do, but just leave it. They'll get what is coming to them, assuming I survive this war. If not, it doesn't really matter, does it? Let's just all sit down and have some dinner, alright?"

To help break the mood that had settled over them, Daphne asked Harry, "So, Harry, where would you like to start your lessons?"

"I have no idea, what do you think I'll need to know first?"

"Well, I'd say marriage contracts. You'll be sixteen soon, and since you're the head of two Ancient and Noble houses, you're probably going to have a large number of them coming in. Luckily, since you are the head, you'll be able to decide what to say on all of them for yourself. Not even your magical guardian can choose for you."

"How many marriages are due to contracts these days? I can't believe that something like that still exists."

"I'd say most, if not all. Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrangle, Narcissa and Lucius Malfoy are two of the more notable current marriages. Molly and Arthur Weasley had a marriage contract before they got married, but in their case, they had dated beforehand and Arthur asked his father to arrange one for him and Molly. That is how most are done, now. A couple will date and fall in love and the head of house will arrange a contract based on the children's wishes.

"Now, there are essentially four different ways a woman can be...let's say, attached, to a man. You have to keep in mind that this is a massively patriarchal society, so any woman who wants to go anywhere in this world will want to be attached, somehow, to a powerful man. Both magically and politically powerful, that is. Seeing as you are the most powerful student at the school, currently, as well as the most famous...well, let's just say, you'll have a lot of owls visiting once you turn sixteen." Daphne enjoyed how pale Harry was getting as she spoke.

"I doubt they'll come here, I think Dumbledore has an owl-repelling ward up. It explains why you never got any fan mail growing up. You should probably talk to him about it once you get back to school. Some of these contracts will have clauses in them that can screw you if you don't answer promptly. We'll help you go through them back at school." said Tracey.

"Right, thanks." said Harry. He sat in a wide-eyed daze.

Daphne took up the lesson again. "So, back to the ways a woman can be 'attached' to a man. The first is the concubine. This is essentially a slave. The concubine has no claim to any inheritance, and any children produced will not carry the family name, unless claimed by the head of the family. Really, the only legal way, currently, to obtain a concubine is through a life-debt owed. Even then, it is still up to the head of house as to whether the life-debt will be paid off via a concubine.

"The second is the Mistress. She is mostly arm candy. She gets a small amount of inheritance and any children get the family name. She has no real political power, she's just there to look good and

make the husband look better. If there had been a better political match for Lucius Malfoy, Narcissa would have likely ended up as a mistress. There aren't too many mistresses, either, as they cost too much to care for and most parents will want more for their daughters.

"The third is the consort, she has almost as much power and influence as the wife. She can speak using the family name, (she is able to hold pretty much any job the husband holds), she could sit in the house seat of the Wizengamot, has a set inheritance given to her, her children bear the house name and could inherit head of house status, if the wife did not have a son. The consort status is agreed upon by all sides. A girl could decide to be a consort if her family is either completely wiped out, or is a smaller family. She would seek out a family she is friends with and trusts if her parents couldn't find a decent match for her. A girl could seek out this arrangement if she doesn't like the man chosen for her by her head of house. The family she is asking would need to be stronger than whomever she is contracted to, or there could be bad repercussions. It is also a relationship that is easily breakable. Say, after a few years, the girl finds a man that is better suited to her and doesn't already have a wife. She'd approach her family, the husband and wife specifically, and have them arrange a marriage contract with this new man. She would then give up all inheritances and rights to the family name.

"Finally, the wife, she has all the same rights, protections, and power of the consorts, only more of it. She is also the law when it comes to any female below her. If they have a problem, they seek out the wife first. Any male child she has will automatically be heir to the head of the family, but only the oldest unless he dies, then any younger males would inherit. While a man can have as many concubines, mistresses, or consorts as he can financially afford, he can only have one wife."

"Wow, that's...that's kinda ridiculous. What happens when a woman is in a relationship like Blaise and Tracey? I can't imagine that they are the first women to feel that way about other women..." Harry stammered off with a blush.

"Well, the best thing that can happen for Blaise and Tracey is that they keep their relationship a secret and they will be able to continue it after they are married off by their parents. If they are found out, they

could be expelled from the family, ostracized by the wizarding world, or sold off as mistresses. Magical children and, more specifically, continuing family names is of such high importance to the wizarding world that homosexuality is an act almost worse than the Unforgivables. Bisexuality doesn't really matter because it's all about pumping out magical children. So most gay men or women will find at least one member of the opposite sex to be with, so that they can continue on with who they really love."

After sitting in silence for quite a long time, processing all of the information that was given to him, Harry stood up to leave. He paused and said, "Thank you for the lesson, Daphne, it has really given me a lot to think about. Same time tomorrow?" When Daphne nodded, Harry turned to leave, but before he did he looked Blaise and Tracey, both, in the eyes for a long moment, then said, "Please, be yourselves here, I promise you have nothing to worry about on my end from me. Goodnight." He said kindly.

Harry spent a few hours that night thinking about the information given to him. He really wondered if the wizarding world as it was, was really worth saving. He then realized that, no, it really wasn't. That wasn't who he was fighting for. He was fighting for the people he cared about most and the people who truly needed protecting, not the brainless sheep who flock to the loudest voice.

He fell asleep not long after making that decision. After passing through the nightmares of his subconscious mind, Harry found himself, once again, gazing at the struggling monster that was his magical core. This time, he was able to study it more closely. He saw great holes where the tar had been burned away from the magic. He figured that these were caused by the times he needed better access to his power, times when his actions were fueled by his love and courage instead of anger and fear. Times such as third year when he used his Patronus to chase away the dementors, or in fourth year when his wand locked with Voldemort's, and more this past year when he fought through the possession.

He also knew, instinctively, that this mass was just from being hit by the killing curse. It wasn't what linked his mind with the Dark Lord's.

That was located somewhere else, perhaps somewhere deep in his forest of hate and pain.

Harry thought long and hard trying to figure out how to clear the tar off of his core without being in a life or death situation. He knew those situations were coming, but decided he wanted as much of his magic available to him as possible when they did. He tried, several times, to focus his magic on burning away the tar. Every time he did, though, the tar would pulse and tighten around his core, effectively distracting him. He noticed a large accumulation of tar near the mouth of the river of magic he was standing next to. When he touched the tar, it sent a searing pain throughout his whole body that jerked him out of his sleep.

He sat in his bed, panting, sweating and shaking. "Note to self, don't touch the evil mind-tar." Harry spent the next few hours calming himself and preparing for another day of work.

As the days passed, he found the work easier to do and the insults less demeaning, now that he had the Slytherins to return to and talk with at night. He felt himself growing more attached to the girls as he spent more time with them. He also knew that he was growing on them, too, seeing as they all called him 'Harry' now, instead of 'Potter.' To Harry, this was an accomplishment in and of itself.

As the day that Hermione and Luna were returning from vacation approached, Harry dreaded being alone again. He knew Dumbledore was going to make him stay at least until his birthday, if not longer, and that was another three and a half weeks at the least.

When Hermione did return on the seventh of July, she immediately wrote to Harry. She told him all about how much she and Luna learned from the magical sections of the libraries and bookstores they found. She also told him how much she missed him, which made Harry smile a bit. Hermione also asked if it would be ok for the Slytherins to stay an extra week with him. Her parents would not be available to pick them up until the following weekend due to the work they had to catch up on. Harry did a mental happy dance at this, as now he only had two and a half weeks by himself before his birthday.

As that final week progressed, Harry's moods took a turn for the worse. The girls noticed that he became more solemn and withdrawn. Finally, the night before the girls were set to take the train to meet Hermione, her parents, and Luna at King's Cross (Hermione lived on the outskirts of the other side of London and decided this would be easier and safer than trying to coordinate train and bus schedules), they cornered Harry in his room right after he got finished cleaning up after the Dursleys' dinner.

"What's wrong, Harry? You're acting like someone is going to take away your favorite toy or something," joked Blaise, although the joke fell somewhat short.

"I know my mood has been off lately, but...well...y'know, i'mgonnamissyoulot." Harry rushed off at the end.

"What's this? Did I hear you right? A...a Gryffindor is going to miss three Slytherins?!? Merlin in a tutu what is the world coming to?" Daphne gasped and swooned with a huge grin to show that she was joking.

"I know, I know! It's not like I'll never see you again. Hell, at most it'll be a few weeks until I do see you, but, I've actually not hated all of my time here thanks to you lot." Harry said with a smirk.

"Well, if that's not a ringing endorsement, I don't know what is." Tracey retorted, dryly with an ear to ear grin and sparkling eyes.

"Alright, alright, enough of this girly, emotional crap. Get changed, Potter, and let's have a nice dinner on our last night here." Blaise had spoken in an over-the-top butch voice that had the room laughing. When Harry didn't move to change, she said, "Well, come on, Harry, I'm hungry and I'm sure Dobby has made us a feast of goodies!"

"Erm, you mind stepping out of the room, while I change?"

"It's just your underwear, Harry. Not like anything any of us hasn't seen from my brothers before." Replied Blaise.

"Um...I-uh-I don't exactly wear any."

"You don't wear any knickers? Why on earth not?" Questioned a flabbergasted Daphne.

"The only clothes I ever get are hand-me-downs from Dudley. Would you want to wear his used underwear?"

"I'm not so hungry anymore." Said a green-looking Blaise.

"We'll be in our room, Harry. You go ahead and get changed."

The four teens spent the rest of the evening and late into the night eating good food and enjoying each other's company freely for the last time for quite a while.

Harry got himself and the girls up just after dawn the next day, and led them from the house to the train station. He kept them hidden under the invisibility cloak until after he had bought their tickets and the train was ready to load. They exchanged quick goodbyes and were off in their separate directions; the Slytherins to London to meet Hermione, and Harry back to the Dursleys where Dobby was returning his room to normal. He decided to leave the silencing charm up. No reason to cause any fuss with the nightmares that he knew were going to return full force without the pleasant distraction of his new friends.

When Daphne got off the train in London, she barely had time to look left, then right, before she was hit with a missile topped with bushy brown hair.

"Daphne! I missed you! How was Harry? What were his relatives like? Did you have to interact with them at all? Did Harry treat you well? You have to tell me everything!" Hermione had said everything quickly and in one breath while she squeezed Daphne in a hug.

"Hello, Hermione. Breathing would be nice." Hermione let go quickly with a blush. "I missed you, too. Our stay with Harry was...interesting, to say the least. We'll tell you all about it, later. For now, why don't you introduce us to these nice people behind you." During their brief

exchange, Hermione's parents and Luna had approached, and Tracey and Blaise had exited the train.

"Oh! Of course, how silly of me! This is my mum and dad, Celia and Eric Granger."

Celia stepped forward and hugged Daphne. "You must be Daphne. Hermione has told us so much about you. We absolutely couldn't wait to meet you. And you must be Blaise and Tracey. It will be good to have so many of Hermione's friends in our home. She had never had anyone over before this year." Mrs. Granger had hugged the two other girls as she greeted them.

"Mum!"

"Hush, now, Hermione. I'm just saying hello.?"

"Hello, Daphne, Tracey, Blaise. How was your trip? I hope the wrackspurts didn't get hold of you on your journey." Luna said quietly, from behind Hermione's mum.

The dynamic of the Granger family had changed somewhat with the introduction of Luna. Celia Granger had always wanted a large family with many children. Problems during her pregnancy with Hermione prevented them from having more children, but that didn't stop her from being a mother to anyone and everyone. It was in her nature, and it was part of why Granger and Granger dentistry was so successful. Parents brought their children to see her because she was so caring and gentle that they didn't really mind when they had a cavity filled or a tooth pulled.

Luna clung to that mothering like a drowning man to a life vest. It was something she hadn't experienced in the six years since her mother died. Celia had seemed to sense that and was constantly giving Luna small, reassuring touches; ruffling her hair, giving her small hugs, squeezing her shoulders in passing. It was just the right amount of attention and care without being smothering like Molly Weasley. Hermione joined in the hugs and squeezes as well, since she was such a tactile person, just like her mother. Luna was in heaven.

"Well, ladies, I don't know about you, but I'm hungry. How about we grab some dinner and maybe we could go see film. I know it's one Muggle thing that Luna hasn't experienced yet, what about you three?" asked Eric Granger.

Daphne, Tracey, and Blaise each shook their heads, each questioning internally what a 'film' was.

"Excellent, nothing better on a Saturday night than Chinese food and a trip to the cinema." Eric stated enthusiastically, "Independence Day just came out, honey." He was looking at his wife with the largest puppy dog eyes any of the girls had ever seen.

"Alright, alright put those away. I guess we can give you this one bit of manliness, seeing as you'll be surrounded by women the rest of the summer."

"Hooray testosterone!" Exclaimed Eric while pumping his fist in the air.

Six pairs of eyes rolled simultaneously. Eric's celebration stopped immediately as a chill went down his spine and he wondered what he had got himself into.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O

"Welcome everyone to tonight's meeting of the Order of the Phoenix." Spoke Albus Dumbledore from the head of the table the Order was sitting around. "Let us begin. Severus, what news from the Dark Lord?"

Severus Snape drew himself from the dark corner he was hiding in and straightened his back importantly. "The Dark Lord is almost completely healed from whatever you did to him in the Ministry. He is planning to escalate his attacks on both the muggles and on certain magical government officials. He is pressuring Greyback hard to gather more werewolves to the cause. He has not yet told us who or how he plans on attacking, just to be ready on the 31st. He means to send a message to Potter."

"Thank you, Severus. You will, of course, inform us when you have more information." At Snape's greasy nod, Dumbledore continued. "I fear it would not be safe to pull Harry from his family's house before his birthday. Therefore we shall gather him and bring him here on the first of August to start his training. Remus, Alastor, Nymphadora, and Kingsley. You shall be in charge of his training. Now, on to other matters. Remus, how go your efforts to convince the werewolf packs not to join the Dark Lord's forces."

Remus stood and spoke in a soft, but strong voice, "Not well. The ministry's anti-werewolf laws have come back to bite them. The packs are looking for a way to strike back at the ministry that has caused them so much suffering. I've tried to say that Fudge is out and some real change could happen if they don't attack, but they aren't willing to wait much longer. I don't blame them."

"Very well, Remus. Continue in your efforts until Harry arrives here. Is there any other business that we have not covered?" Albus listened attentively, processing the information given to him in each additional report for the next three hours. "Excellent, please return to your duties."

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Harry stumbled into his room a week before his birthday. He was dirty and exhausted. He had replaced three rose bushes that his Aunt Petunia had claimed he had let die. How he did that while he was at school, he had no idea. His mood had taken a sharp downward spiral ever since the girls had left. The only thing keeping him from going into complete depression were the almost constant letters going between his room and the 'Girls of Granger House' as he had dubbed them. This was why he was expecting a letter when he got back to his room that evening. What he wasn't expecting was the delivery system. Dumbledore's Phoenix, Fawkes, was sitting regally on his desk.

"Fawkes? What are you doing here?" Fawkes trilled a note that greatly lifted Harry's spirits while showing him the letter attached to his leg.

"Professor Dumbledore sent me a letter, eh? Perhaps he's finally letting me know when I can get out of here." He untied the letter and began reading.

'Dear Harry,

I hope that this missive finds you well. I know the pain of the loss of Sirius is still with you, but I hope the time spent with your family has helped you come to terms with it. I write to tell you that you will be moved to Grimmauld Place on First August. I have arranged some combat training for you in the form of Remus Lupin, Alastor Moody, Nymphadora Tonks, and Kingsley Shacklebolt. In order to do this, though, I have requested a license for the provisional use of magic for you. Unfortunately, the new Minister, Rufus Scrimgeour, has requested a meeting with you before he will allow you the license. I have arranged this meeting for this coming Monday, two days before your birthday. If you are agreeable, please send a response with Fawkes. He has consented to ferry you to my office at 8 am on the morning of our meeting.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore'

"I don't know whether to be angry that Dumbledore has arranged all this without asking me, or to be grateful for the training." Harry said to himself as he wrote his agreement on the back of the letter and gave it to Fawkes to return to Dumbledore. "Thank you Fawkes, for agreeing to be my transportation."

With a trill Fawkes leapt into the air and disappeared with a burst of flames.

Harry sat with a sigh, "One week, then I'm gone." He then pulled some more parchment out and wrote to the Girls of Granger House about this new development. "I wish I could have that lot with me...oh well. Nothing to be done about it now."

Harry spent his free time over the next four days writing letters and studying his newest defense books. He wanted to be prepared for

whatever his tutors would throw at him. He figured Moody would be particularly brutal.

When Monday morning rolled around, Harry felt he was as prepared as he was going to be. The Girls had given him plenty of ideas. He would only do as Luna said and accuse the Minister of being a part of the Rotfang Conspiracy if things got out of hand. He saw that 8 am was quickly approaching, so he put on his best school uniform as it was the nicest looking and best fitting outfit he had. As soon as 8 o'clock rolled around, Fawkes appeared with a burst of flame.

"Good morning, Fawkes, are you ready to take me to Professor Dumbledore?" Fawkes simply flew to Harry's shoulder and flashed them back to the Headmaster's office.

"Ah, Harry, right on time. Have a seat. Would you like a lemon drop?"

"No, thank you, sir."

"Very well, shall we be off?"

"Yes, sir." Harry was working as hard as he could to keep his anger and mistrust of the Headmaster out of his voice.

"Then, come around here and take hold of this Portkey. It will take us to the room we shall be meeting the minister in."

"One question, sir. Could we bring your pensieve?"

This brought Dumbledore up short. "Why would we need that, Harry? This should be a simple meeting to determine whether the Minister will allow you to practice magic in the last month of this summer."

"We both know that this is much more than that, sir, I'm sure the Minister has an agenda of his own that he would like to talk me into. It's only fair that I have one of mine."

"Would you care to tell me what you have in mind, Harry?"

Harry shot Dumbledore a mischievous grin that reminded the old man of the worst of Harry's father, godfather, and the Weasley twins combined.

"Let it be a surprise. I rather think you might enjoy the show. Now, shall we?"

"Yes, yes of course. If you'll just place a finger on this parchment," said a shocked Dumbledore after retrieving his pensieve.

Harry touched the parchment and with a tug behind his navel, he was transported directly into the room where he was to be meeting with the Minister. The room was fairly nondescript. It had wood panelling on the wall such that the door was practically invisible until opened. There was a long, elliptical table centered in the middle of the room. Luckily for Harry, the room was empty because, as always, he landed flat on his face, grumbling to himself. "Bloody Portkeys, I can never get the landing right."

Dumbledore just chuckled, placed the pensieve on the table and pulled out a piece of parchment. He wrote a quick note on it and tapped the parchment with his wand. The note then folded into an airplane and sailed out of the room through a panel in the wall that slid open. "I have just notified the Minister of our arrival. He should be here momentarily."

And, true to his words, Harry had barely enough time to brush himself off and straighten his robes before the door to the meeting room opened and a group of people entered. A much larger group than Harry would have expected for 'a simple meeting.'

The first through the door were Aurors, Harry guessed from their uniforms. The first was Auror Dawlish, whom he recognized from the attempt to arrest Dumbledore, the second he had never seen before. Next in line was a stone faced Percy Weasley. Harry knew that Percy had yet to make amends with his family, so Harry just dismissed him as another Ministry toady. After Percy came a woman he recognized as Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magic Law Enforcement, Harry couldn't think of any reason for her to be there. The last through the door was a man that, to Harry, greatly resembled a lion in

his facial features and beard. Harry's guess that this was the Minister was confirmed when Dumbledore stood to shake his hand and make introductions.

"Ah, Rufus, I'd like to introduce you to Harry Potter. Harry, this is Minister Rufus Scrimgeour."

Harry also shook the Minister's hand, gave a curt nod and said, "Sir." Then promptly sat back down.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Mr. Potter, I have heard a great deal about you. Erm, what are you doing?"

As soon as Harry had sat he began rolling up his left sleeve so that his forearm was bare. "Professor Dumbledore, would you mind terribly casting your strongest Finite Incantatum on my forearm, here?"

"Why would you want me to do that, Harry?"

"Please, sir?"

"Very well, Harry." Said a confused Dumbledore. When he cast the spell, nothing happened.

"Thank you, sir. Now, Minister, as I have just proven to you that I am, in fact, not a Death Eater, I would appreciate it if you and everyone else in this room would do the same. Headmaster? You first."

"Now, see here, I can assure you that no one in here is a Death Eater, boy!" Blustered the Minister.

Harry's demeanor went from pleasant to cold when the Minister called him 'boy.' "Yes, and as the Professor has assured me that Hogwarts is the safest place in the world for me, yet I have had more life threatening situations there than I'd like to admit, you'll find my trust in any assurances from authority figures extremely lacking. And don't call me boy." Harry finished in such an icy tone that everyone in the room was sure they would be able to see their breath.

"This is the Minister of Magic, you can't talk to him like that!" Yipped Percy Weasley.

"Stuff it, Weatherbee. I'm already not pleased with the ambush that was obviously set for me here. I was told that this would be 'a simple meeting to determine whether or not I will be allowed to practice magic this summer.' It is obviously more than that. It looks to me like I am on trial for some reason that I am unsure of. Again. Now, left forearms, please. Constant Vigilance and all that."

Harry just sat and stared at everyone around the room. The tension felt was ratcheted up several notches until Madam Bones finally said, I like your thinking, Mr. Potter. Alastor is quite right, we could all do to have a bit more of his Constant Vigilance." With that she laid her bare left forearm on the table where Dumbledore cast a finite on it and nothing happened. With the Head of DMLE's example, each Auror did the same, and also had clean arms. Dumbledore then set his arm on the table and politely asked Madam Bones to cast the spell, leaving his arm clean as all the others.

With the rest of the room staring at them, Percy and the Minister also relented and laid their arms on the table. When Percy's arm came up clean, Harry muttered to himself, but loud enough for the others to hear, "So he's not a Death Eater, just a prick. Interesting." Percy flushed and was about to open his mouth to retort when Harry spoke in a louder voice. "Excellent, now that we know that none of us are Death Eaters, let's find out why I'm really here. Minister?"

"W-well, I don't know if you've read the Prophet in the last few weeks-

Harry cut him off by saying "No, Minister, I canceled my subscription when they began proclaiming me insane and a liar. What are they saying about me now?"

"They're saying you're the Chosen One."

"Ah, so I'm a hero again, fantastic. I'm guessing that the people are rallying around that and expect me to defeat Voldemort? When everyone in the room, bar he and Dumbledore, shivered, Harry lost

his patience. "You lot are the bloody leaders of our government and are afraid of a silly, made up name. No wonder we're losing this war."

"Are you, or are you not the Chosen One?"

"Are you really planning on pinning the future of the wizarding world on a sixteen year old boy?"

Harry saw, out of the corner of his eye, Madam Bones and the Headmaster watching the conversation with an amused interest.

"It doesn't matter if you are or are not the Chosen One, the people think you are and are behind you."

"For now."

"Yes, for now. It would really be a help to the Ministry's efforts in this war if you were known to be supporting us."

"Ah, we get to the crux of the matter. You want me to support the Ministry in whatever it is doing, so that the people don't panic. Well, what are you doing that I should support? Are you actually doing anything helpful, or are you doing useless things so you can 'be seen doing something.' Ah, that's why I'm here isn't it? You wanted me here because, if you have my support, it doesn't matter what you do otherwise, the public will love you." Harry finished staring the Minister directly in the eyes. The Minister, to his credit, met the steely stare with one of his own.

Harry broke first and said, "I came here today to see if you are any different than Fudge."

"I thought you were here to obtain a license to do magic over the summer?" Blurted Percy.

"Yes, that is the--" started Dumbledore, only to be cut off by Harry.

"Tell me something, Madam Bones. Can your underage magic detectors detect any magic being done by a wizard living under a Fidelius Charm?"

"No, Mr. Potter, they can't."

Harry gave Dumbledore a look with a single raised eyebrow as he responded, "I thought not. That license will be useless in a few days, as I will be moved to a home that was placed under the Fidelius for my protection."

"Ah, so you are the Chosen One! You wouldn't need that level of protection if you weren't!" Exclaimed a victorious Minister.

"You said it yourself, Minister. It's all about perception. It doesn't really matter if I am or not. The reason I need so much protection is that Voldemort believes me to be a threat. It doesn't matter if I actually am or not, he still wants me dead, just in case. Anyone he desires dead as badly as he does me needs a Fidelius Charm...or to be as powerful and experienced as the Headmaster, here, of which I am neither. I am not going to answer whether I am or am not the Chosen One, because it doesn't matter. Let's move on."

Harry shifted his gaze, which softened some, to Madam Bones and continued, "Madam Bones, you haven't said much and, from what Susan has told me, I can't believe that you would be a party to what the Minister was trying, here. If I may ask, why are you here?"

"From what Susan and Minerva have told me, Mr. Potter, I was intrigued. Minerva has told me that you wanted to be an Auror when you graduate. I wanted to meet you to get your measure. I also wanted to thank you for including Susie in your defense club this year. She told me how much she learned from you. And no, I was not told about what Rufus was going to try, here." She gave the Minister a hard look that had him squirming in his chair.

"I was glad to have her with us, Madam Bones, she's an exceptional witch. Please pass along my warmest regards the next time you see her."

"I will, Mr. Potter."

"Why did you come, Potter?" Asked Percy snidely.

"I wanted to see if this Minister was going to be any better than the last-"

This time, Harry was cut off as the door opened and the simpering, toad-like visage of Dolores Umbridge entered the room.

"Minster Scrimgeour, I hate to interrupt your meeting, but-"

Harry didn't let her finish as he stood and faced Dumbledore and said "This meeting is finished. I don't need to talk to anyone whose advisors include a bigot who tries to murder and torture children. I have my answer. Let's go, Headmaster."

"Those are lofty accusations to throw at a high ranking Ministry official, Mr. Potter. Perhaps you should be arrested for treason," stated Percy Weasley, his nose stuck firmly in the air.

Harry walked around the table, and slammed his right hand down in between Madam Bones and Percy. The words 'I must not tell lies' scarred into his hand could easily be seen.

"What should we care about what you did to yourself, Potter? Perhaps the papers were right, and you are unbalanced." sneered Percy.

"This, you little shit, was done to me by your hero, Dolores, there. At least twice a week, every week, for four or more hours the entire year, she had me writing lines with a quill that used my blood and cut this into the back of my hand over and over. All the while, I was telling the truth. Headmaster, let's go."

Dead silence filled the room as everyone looked back and forth between Harry as he walked around to a still seated Dumbledore and a red-faced Umbridge.

"That's the torture, what is the murder?" Asked a quietly fuming Madam Bones. Percy was shocked into silence and the Minister knew that he had lost any bargaining chip he might have had.

"The murder is her ordering two dementors to attack me last summer. You remember the farce of a trial that came of that, don't you, Madam Bones?" Harry asked in a sickly sweet tone of voice that was unquestionable in its mocking of Umbridge.

"You can't prove any of this, Potter! It's just your word against mine, and I am the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic!"

"Ah, but did you notice the stone basin sitting in the middle of the room? That would be a pensieve. If Professor Dumbledore would be kind enough to show me how to put my memories in there, I can show you exactly what happened."

Dumbledore pulled his wand and told Harry to think very clearly about the memory he wanted shown. The memory strand was pulled out and deposited into the stone bowl. Dumbledore tapped several runes on the side and a three dimensional image of the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher's office was shown with Umbridge pointing her wand at Harry in his chair, while the rest of his friends were being held by her Inquisitorial Squad.

Harry had given the memory of the entire encounter, including when Snape had entered and was questioned about the veritaserum.

Again, silence reigned in the meeting room before the Minister simply said, "Dolores, you're fired."

Madam Bones, then said, "Aurors, arrest her. Take her wand and take her to a holding cell. I'll want to question her with veritaserum later."

"Perhaps now you know one of the many reasons why I don't trust the Ministry." Said Harry quietly yet still forcefully.

Dumbledore asked, "Was that the reason why you wanted to bring the pensieve, or was there something else?"

"Something else. I believe it is time to correct one of the greatest injustices of the wizarding world. My godfather, Sirius Black."

"The escaped murderer?" Asked the Minister.

"He was completely innocent and was held for twelve years in Azkaban without a trial. It's time to clear his name."

"Very well, have him come in and we'll give him a proper trial," said Scrimgeour.

"He's dead. He died protecting me from Death Eaters during the Department of Mysteries battle." Harry said in a hollow voice. "I'll give you the memories that my friends and I tried to give Fudge back in third year, but were shooed away because he wanted to have his all-encompassing scape-goat."

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Just before Harry fell asleep that night, he whispered to the heavens, "You're free now, Sirius. I promise to make the Black name mean something again."

Harry didn't leave his room at all during the next two days. He didn't sleep much at a time, either. The discussion of Sirius' innocence brought all of the pain and guilt he had been avoiding to the surface. He mostly studied in preparation for his upcoming 'tutoring.' He didn't doubt that Moody would start off by firing a barrage curse straight at him and wanted to be prepared.

It was quickly approaching midnight. His birthday. Normally, Harry would have stayed up to say 'Happy Birthday' to himself as he had done most years of his life, but, as he hadn't slept much in the past 48 hours, he was fast asleep as the bell tolled.

Harry was ripped out of his standard nightmare and straight into something much worse. He could tell immediately that what he was seeing was real and current. He was inside Nagini again, but this time he heard Voldemort's high, cold voice in his head. "I wanted to be the first to wish you a Happy Birthday, Harry. I hope you like your present."

Nagini paused and looked at the nameplate of the mailbox attached to the house that five robed and masked Death Eaters were currently entering.

It read 'Granger.'

Chapter 5:

Lord Voldemort sat on his throne in the ball room of his Fidelius Charmed and Unplottable stronghold. His red, snake-like eyes were closed while his faithful servants gathered before him. It was the night of July 30th several hours before midnight. He eyes were closed because he was ensuring that his occlumency barriers were shut tight. He didn't want the Potter brat to see anything until it was too late. The Dark Lord had only just recovered enough from the battle in the Atrium of the Ministry building.

He didn't know what that boy did to him when he was attempting the possession, but it had nearly cost the Dark Lord his mind. Now, Voldemort knew better than to taunt and tempt the boy through his mind. This night, though, this night was special. He wanted that brat to see everything. He was sure the events of this night would break his nemesis, then he just had the old man to take care of and there were plans yet to be set in motion to deal with that.

His mental shields firmly in place, Voldemort opened his eyes and surveyed his minions gathered before him. His inner circle standing shoulder to shoulder in a circle with him as the apex. On his right was his most faithful and most deadly servant, Bellatrix Lestrange. The spark of madness in her eyes was smoldering in anticipation of the carnage she would be able to unleash tonight. In the farthest space away from Voldemort stood Lucius Malfoy, his spot very symbolic of where he stood in the Dark Lord's eyes.

The rest of his many minions were arranged behind his inner circle, filling the room that was almost as large as the Great Hall at Hogwarts. Voldemort could not wait until that prize was his, but, all good things come to those who wait, and there were more pressing matters to deal with at the moment. The Dark Lord rose to speak and the room, which was already quiet, became as still as death.

“My faithful Death Eaters, welcome. The time has come to reveal our power to the wizarding world once again. Tonight we shall strike fear into the hearts of those who are not faithful to our cause.” Voldemort spoke in his high, cold voice, and did not need to cast a sonorous or even raise his voice. He had the full and undivided attention of

everyone in the room. He reveled in the way he was worshipped. "You have all been given your targets. Go now and prepare. The attacks begin precisely at the stroke of midnight. Let my mark hang in the air above the mutilated husks of those who would dare to think they can resist me!"

The Death Eaters let out a blood thirsty cheer as they emptied the room to do their masters bidding. Bellatrix was near orgasmic in her bloodlust. Before his inner circle had left, the Dark Lord called out "Dolohov, remain."

"Yes, my Lord," replied Antonin Dolohov. He approached and knelt before the Dark Lord with his head bowed.

When the room was empty but for the two of them and Voldemort's familiar, Nagini, the Dark Lord spoke again. "Have you selected those who would accompany you?"

"Yes, my Lord. I am taking four others with me, although, I expect they will be needed only as look-outs."

"Which of my faithful will aid you?"

"Bole, Pucey, Flint, and Gibbon, my Lord."

"So many of our newer recruits, Dolohov? Hmm, very well, there should be little resistance for this mission. I am sending Nagini with you. I shall be in command of her I shall notify you if there are wards in place on the Mudblood's house. Give Nagini one of the muggles. Otherwise, you are free to do as you wish. I know you want to finish what you started with the mudblood in the Ministry. Make a show of it, I want Potter broken from this. It is nearly time. Go, now."

"Yes, my Lord. Thank you, my Lord. I shall not fail you." Replied Dolohov.

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Just before Dolohov opened the door to the Granger house, he looked back at the three new recruits.

“Put silencing charms on everything. Your feet, the stairs, hinges on doors, everything. Stun them immediately. We'll have plenty of time to taunt and play, later. Check every room. I will be preparing their largest room for our...performance.” Dolohov finished with a lecherous grin.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Hermione Granger lay in her bed, fast asleep as the clock chimed midnight. It had taken a long time for her to fall asleep tonight, she was excited because she and her house guests would be portkeying to Headquarters in a few days time. No matter how much fun she had had with Daphne, Tracey, Blaise and Luna over the last almost month, she still missed Harry, Ron, and Ginny. She had been in a deep sleep since around eleven that evening. She was laying on her stomach with only a sheet laying over her in the warm summer night. She was wearing only a tank top and a pair of men's boxer shorts.

This was why she was so surprised when Crookshanks landed on her bum, his needle-like claws extended.

“Yow! What the...Crookshanks! Whu...” But Hermione's groggy exclamations were cut short as she heard two muffled voices say “Stupefy!” And the soft thumps of bodies hitting the floor.

Adrenalin pumped through her system when she realized that the house was under attack. She grabbed her wand off the bed side table and slid to the side of the bed away from her door to give herself some cover. Her mind working furiously to come up with a plan.

'Ok, Hermione, think. What would Harry do in this situation? He'd perform some inhuman act of magic and bravery and attack everyone at once. Bloody hell.'

Hermione was surprised by her door suddenly bursting open and two stupefy curses impacting on her bed. She hadn't heard any footsteps approaching.

“Expelliarmus!” Shouted Hermione.

Her spell connected and the attacker in her doorway was blown back against the wall, his wand landing on the bed in front of Hermione.

She ducked out of the way of the return Stupefy that was fired at her.

Hermione was thinking what to do when her second attacker suddenly screamed out in pain.

“Gah! Bloody cat!”

Hermione capitalized on his lack of attention and fired two quick stunners and knocked out the two at her door.

She quickly exited her room to go check on her parents, but froze when the voice that haunted her nightmares called out to her.

“Mudblood! I've got your parents here with me. Toss your wand down the stairs and come down with your hands up or they die much more painfully than they already will.”

As Hermione crept forward, she didn't notice the door to the guest room ease open behind her, or the wand stick out from the darkness. The last thing she heard before darkness took her was the unfamiliar voice of Gibbon saying “Stupefy.”

“Well done, Gibbon. Bole, go wake those other two idiots up and get their wands back to them. The Dark Lord will punish them when we return.”

“You'll never guess what I found, Dolohov,” said Gibbon as he carried Hermione's limp form down the stairs. “It's those three bitches the Dark Lord had promised us. I guess they came to the mudblood for protection when Malfoy tried to recruit them. The Lovegood chit that was at the Ministry is here, too. I bet Potter will enjoy seeing what we do to her, too!”

“Hmm,” grunted Dolohov as he faced the coiled snake in the center of the stage he had transfigured out of a couch. The room no longer resembled the warm and inviting Granger living room. It was now

simply a small, raised stage surrounded by three foot to ceiling wooden poles. "My Lord, should we give the three traitors the same treatment as the Mudblood now?" The snake shook it's head, no. "Very well, my Lord, we will bring them back with us to deal with later. What about the Lovegood girl?" The snake nodded, yes. "Your will be done, my Lord."

"Bole, Flint, Pucey, tie them to the poles." Ordered Dolohov as he transfigured four more poles when they had retrieved all of the unconscious occupants of the house.

With all of their prisoners tied firmly to the poles, Dolohov cast Rennervate on them one by one until they were all awake.

They were arranged around the stage. Centered in front of the stairs and fireplace was Celia. To her right, arcing toward the wall were Hermione, Eric, then Daphne. On Celia's other side were Luna, Blaise, and Tracey.

Tracey quickly examined the situation and declared her plan to the others. "Well, we're fucked."

"Yes, this is quite troublesome. I was having a rather wonderful dream about chocolate syrup. Hermione, how long do you think until Harry comes to rescue us? I am quite looking forward to seeing him again."

"Mum, Dad. Say the words. Say the words and get some help. Please." Hermione whispered desperately to her parents while the others were talking.

"We're not leaving you, Hermione. Your fate is our fate." Celia Granger declared just as quietly. Unfortunately, Bole heard the last bit.

"Oh, no," he said, "Your fate is going to be considerably worse than hers. Dad, there, will be getting off the lightest. We're giving him to the snake, first. She's mighty hungry."

"Everyone into position. Flint, by the door. Bole, by the back windows. Pucey, you stay by the stairs in case someone decides to apparate to

the top floor and come down that way. Gibbon, you stay by the fireplace. We're not sure if the mudblood had floo installed. My Lord, shall we begin?" Dolohov asked the snake.

The snake nodded and coiled itself on the floor, preparing to strike.

Dolohov waved his wand and the ropes holding Eric Granger in place vanished, leaving his hands still tied behind his back. Another wave of his wand and Hermione's father was brought forward, kneeling in front of the massive snake not three meters away.

The Grangers were a somewhat religious family. They firmly believed in God and, although they didn't always get to church, Eric Granger said a small prayer every night before bed asking for the continued health and safety of his family. So, with death staring him in the face from red slitted eyes, Eric Granger closed his eyes and prayed once more. "God, if you're going to answer my prayers, now would be a bloody good time."

He knelt with his eyes closed, waiting for the snake to strike.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Harry Potter had also gone to bed early the night he was to turn sixteen. He was exhausted from not sleeping much the previous two days. He started out, once again, with the standard nightmares he was used to, but just before midnight he was pulled from his nightmare. This time, though, he didn't go to what he called his mind-scape. This time he was pulled into something altogether more horrifying than his nightmares, yet it was just as familiar.

Harry continued his struggle to free himself from Voldemort's hold on his mind, then he saw who the snake was with and where they were. He heard Dolohov ask, "Can you feel any wards, my Lord?" Harry felt the snake shake its head no. When Dolohov gave his commands and entered the house, Harry began fighting harder than ever. Harry fought so hard that Voldemort had to release most of his control over Nagini to keep Harry's mind where it was, only regaining control enough to make the snake answer any questions asked by his minion.

Harry was finally able to break free when he saw the entire occupants of the Granger household tied to wooden poles around the stage. His love for those in the room and his intense, nearly manic, desire to protect them was too much for the Dark Lord to handle. Harry found himself back in his mind-scape, flying through the air as though he was shot through a cannon.

Harry knew that he was in complete control, here, and angled his flight straight for his monstrous magical core. As he flew, he thought frantically, "I need something to kill a snake!" Memories of stabbing a Basilisk through the top of the mouth with the sword of Gryffindor flashed before his eyes. Harry cried out in desperation "I need that sword!" He felt his magic respond, burning away the rest of the tar and sending a tidal wave of magic through the riverbeds, instantly filling them with the glowing, multi-colored liquid.

Harry saw that he was flying straight for his core and decided not to stop at the edge of the ravine. He needed his full magic, and he needed it now. Further memories of studying his mother's notebook flew in front of his eyes. "Concentration, Focus, Will." Harry thought, "No time like the present to test Mum's theory." He dove straight into the gaping maw of his magical core-beast.

There was a brief, but intense struggle for dominance as Harry's magic wanted to unleash itself wildly upon the world, but Harry's determination to save his friends and his iron will brought his magic firmly under his control. It was thrumming under his skin ready to be released.

He brought himself out of his mindscape and opened his eyes, only to look up at Marge Dursley standing over him with her cane in the air, ready to strike. Harry paid her no attention as he willed his magic to bring his wand to his left hand, the Sword of Gryffindor to his right, his glasses to his face, and his whole body to the Granger's living room.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Marge Dursley thought of herself as a patient woman, even though she was anything but. She had gone to bed early because she had consumed far too much alcohol with dinner that night. Therefore, she

was still slightly drunk when the moans of her brother's no good, lay-about nephew woke her.

"I have had it with that boy! I'm going to teach him a lesson he'll never forget!" Marge slurred as she got out of bed, threw on her nightgown, and hobbled out of her room, cane in hand. She didn't bother knocking on the boy's door this time. She just barged into the room, straight into a wall of sound that she had not been expecting. What Marge couldn't have known was that Harry still had a silencing charm put up on his room, his screams of terror and effort to get away from Voldemort's mind were loud enough to partially filter through the charm.

"Bloody hell, boy! Stop that racket!" Yelled Marge, as she grabbed the sleeping boy by his hair and threw his limp body onto the floor. She waddled around him, examining him. He had stopped screaming now, Marge wondered if he were dead. She stopped between Harry and his bed and poked him in the ribs with her cane. When he wheezed a bit confirming he was still alive, she decided to teach him that lesson he would never forget. She raised her cane in the air to strike at him with all her might, when his eyes popped open.

His eyes were glowing green! Marge froze completely in place, cane still in the air. Harry held out his left hand and a stick flew to it from under his pillow. He held out his right hand and a pillar of red and gold fire seemed to rise from it. With no movement by him at all, his glasses flew and settled on his face. Then, the boy burst into green flame and disappeared.

Marge, unfortunately for her health didn't know Harry had disappeared because the wave of magic that had exploded from him when he disappeared through the many wards surrounding the house blew her straight out of the house. Right through Harry's bedroom wall. She landed on top of Vernon's car in the driveway, crushing the roof down to the seat. The wave of magic destroyed everything made of glass in the house and the houses surrounding Number 4.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Time seemed to freeze for Eric Granger after he had closed his eyes. His belief in God was completely confirmed, though. Instead of the pain he thought would happen when what he thought of was a big, fuck-off snake bit him, he instead felt the intense heat of a burst of flame and the spray of a warm, thick liquid.

Eric opened his eyes to see his daughter's best friend, Harry Potter, standing in front of him. The young man was shirtless, wearing just pajama bottoms, was straddling the big fuck-off snake, and was currently skewering said snake's head with a ruby-hilted sword. Harry's eyes were glowing green behind his glasses and his hair was being blown around as if he were standing in a hurricane, though the air in the house was still. Time then reasserted itself and Harry's 150 pound body was thrown through the air by the death spasms of the 600 pound snake.

Harry felt himself being lifted and tossed through the air like a rag doll. He flew between the poles holding Celia and Hermione and towards a Death Eater standing by the stairs. The wizard decided that the man would provide a softer landing than wall or floor and altered his trajectory with a burst of magic.

Pain shot through Harry's right shoulder as it dislocated when he rammed it into the sternum of the Death Eater. He heard the gasp of pain from his cushion as most of the man's ribs were snapped by the impact.

Harry rolled himself and the Death Eater over, so the cloaked wizard was a human shield. He needn't have worried. None of the other wizards in the room had yet processed what had happened. Harry used that pause to his advantage. He quickly aimed and cast Depulso into his shield's chest, sending the man flying through the into the ceiling air, splintering the pole holding Hermione captive. Hermione had watched this happen and was able to lean herself enough to not get injured.

Time seemed to slow as Harry paused a moment to survey the scene. There was a Death Eater by the door, taking aim at Harry. Another was by the back window, who was standing still, looking at the Death Eater Harry had just sent across the room with wide eyes. Dolohov

was struggling to get to his feet from on top of another wizard by the fireplace. Harry assumed he had been thrown by the snake, too. The wizard Harry had used as a human shield was lying in an expanding pool of blood.

Hermione's Dad was cutting the ropes tying his hands loose with the sword still sticking out of the snake's head and floor. Hermione was struggling to get her hands from behind her back.

Harry burst into motion.

"Confringo" Harry cast at the man at the front door with all his power. The spell hit Flint's right shoulder, exploding it in a spray of blood and bone and destroying the door behind him.

Harry spun and fired at Bole, who was starting to turn his wand at Harry, "Diffindo." Bole's wand arm was amputated at the elbow.

"Expelliarmus" Dolohov said calmly. Harry's wand rocketed out of his hand before he had a chance to do anything.

Harry froze, then slowly turned to the two wizards still unharmed. Dolohov was still lying on top of Gibbon, and had simply disarmed Harry from the ground.

Mr. Granger had finished cutting through his ropes and was crawling over to Tracey as Dolohov stood.

The Inner Circle member dismissed Eric as a harmless muggle and focused back on Potter.

"I must say, I am impressed, Potter. You were able to take out three of us, but unfortunately, you weren't good enough."

"P-p-p-please, Dolohov, help me." Whimpered a deathly pale Bole from where he lay bleeding out from his wound.

"You were weak, Bole. This was a training mission for you and you failed. I'm letting you off nicely by doing this. Avada Kedavra." The sickly green spell hit Bole squarely in the chest, ending his suffering.

The other two were either dead already, or would be soon, so Dolohov didn't bother with them.

“What do you say, Gibbon, think we can still have a little fun with the mudblood? Potter is still here to watch, we could bring him back to our Lord already broken.”

“I'm all for it, Dolohov, I was first in line for Greengrass over there. Might as well have some fun now. I like it when they are all cowering in fear. Gives me my jollies.”

“You're not touching any of them!” Snarled Harry. Throughout the whole exchange between the Death Eaters, Harry and the Grangers had been moving. Hermione had freed Celia, and they were clustered around Luna. Eric had freed Tracey and those two were working on Blaise.

Daphne was still tied up across the room from everyone else. Harry had been slowly moving himself toward her. He also saw his wand sitting three feet in front of Daphne. Dolohov hadn't bothered to catch it when he disarmed Harry.

“You're in no position to do anything about it, Potter! Gibbon, why don't you show Greengrass what the Dark Lord does to traitors? I'll keep an eye on the boy,” snarked Dolohov.

Once again, Harry blurred into motion, pure adrenalin making him move faster than he was normally able. Gibbon snarled “Crucio” at Daphne, whose eyes widened in fear and her body tensed in anticipation of the pain. Dolohov was following Harry's movement with his own wand, as the boy slid in front of the curse meant for Daphne, and cast his own Crucio.

Harry was hit with both torture curses at the same time. Pain like he had never felt before exploded through him and he doubled over onto the ground spasming uncontrollably. He remained in enough control of himself so that he didn't scream. His vision began graying out as he grabbed uselessly at the floor. He could vaguely hear screams for mercy as he writhed in pain.

The screams of his friends brought some of his sense back to him, allowed him to fight the pain enough to realize his hands were inches away from his wand. Screwing up every bit of determination and strength he had remaining, Harry grabbed his wand, pointed it out and ground out "Accio sword" focusing inwardly on making his magical core respond how he wanted, even as he shook like a leaf in the wind.

The sword leapt out of the floor and snake and soared through the air, narrowly missing Dolohov, but impaling Gibbon straight through his heart.

The pain stopped as both curses were cut off.

"My, my, but you are resourceful, aren't you?" Asked Dolohov as he stalked toward Harry, who was shaking in the aftershocks of the torture curse. "Too bad it was all for naught. You're useless, now. Probably can't even lift your wand. It's a shame you won't be able to watch the show, but I'm not taking any more chances with you. Avada Ke-"

THWACK!

Dolohov fell face first into the floor, unconscious, leaving Hermione standing behind him holding a large piece of the wooden pole that had been splintered and breathing hard. She had a crazed look of vengeance in her eyes.

With a primal scream, Hermione brought the piece of wood down once more on the back of Dolohov's head. She threw the bloody wood aside and knelt next to Harry.

"Oh, Harry, are you alright?"

" 'mf-f-f-fine." Harry stuttered as he still was shaking. He tried to talk more, but stopped and coughed up blood.

"Why'd you take that curse, Harry? Why would you do something like that?" Asked a frantic Daphne, who also knelt next to Harry after she was freed by Luna.

"P-p-p-promis-s-sed." Harry stuttered.

"Hush now, Harry, try and relax. We've got to get you some help," said Celia Granger as she looked at him in concern.

Luna had found and returned everyone's wands to them as the conversation was going on. She then knelt next to Harry with the others.

"Right, everyone gather around and grab hold of each other. Make sure you are at least holding on to me, Mum, or Dad," said Hermione, "we're going to use our Portkeys to get to headquarters. Someone can come back to deal with this later."

When everyone was holding onto one of the three with Portkeys, Hermione and her parents said, "Snuffle's house," and with a jerk behind their navels were whisked off to Grimmauld Place.

They landed in an unceremonious heap in the drab entrance hall. The loud thump drew the attention of Mrs. Weasley and the portrait of Sirius' mother, which started screaming about muggle filth and blood traitors.

"You own this house, Harry?" Asked Eric as he stared at the screaming portrait.

"Y-y-yes, s-s-s-sir."

"Charming." Eric replied dryly.

Harry wheezed out a laugh that quickly turned into another coughing fit, sending more blood dribbling down his chin.

"Easy, there Harry," cautioned Eric

"Hermione? What's happened? Oh my, is that Harry? Who are all these people and what are they doing with you and Harry?"

"We were attacked in my home, Mrs. Weasley. The girls were house guests of ours. Harry came somehow and saved us, but he was injured badly. We need Madam Pomfrey, tell her Harry was hit with multiple Cruciatus curses."

Mrs. Weasley paled dramatically at the last. She calmed herself and then began ordering everyone around. "Hermione, get Harry upstairs to Sirius' old room, it has the largest bed. The rest of you follow me into the kitchen until we can get Professor Dumbledore to sort you out. I'm going to floo Poppy."

"I'm going to help Hermione," said Celia and she hurried over to where her daughter was struggling with Harry's weight. Between the two women, they were able to get Harry upstairs and into bed. Eric allowed himself and the other girls to be herded into the kitchen. He thought that it would be best to give Harry some space.

Harry opened his mouth to say something to Hermione, but she cut him off before he could get anything out. "Don't speak, Harry. Mrs. Weasley will have Madam Pomfrey here, soon. She'll fix you right up." He had started to calm slightly because Celia had sat next to him on the bed and was carefully running her fingers through his hair. Hermione sat on his other side and was holding his shaking hand in one of hers as she tenderly caressed his face with the other.

After a few minutes in which Harry didn't stop shaking, Madam Pomfrey bustled into the room. "What's this, Mr. Potter, can't get enough of me during the school year you have to get yourself into trouble over the summer as well?"

She had already begun running her wand over him and was muttering to herself. "Severely dislocated shoulder, the worst Cruciatus exposure I've ever seen, slight case of magical exhaustion. Tsk, you don't do things by half, do you, Mr. Potter?"

"He was hit by two Cruciatus Curses at once, Madam Pomfrey." Said Hermione weakly.

"Oh dear. Well, take this, it's the anti-Cruciatus potion. It'll help with the residual pain and most of the shaking, but I'm afraid that the rest

will going to have to go away on its own. That may take a few days.” She waved her wand in an intricate motion over Harry's injured shoulder and he both felt and heard it pop back into place. “I don't want you to move that shoulder too much for the next three days. It will also be quite tender. Drink this, it's dreamless sleep potion. I don't want you out of bed for at least all of tomorrow. Here is a pain potion if you need it, but the dreamless sleep should keep you out all night. I need to get back to Hogwarts in case of emergency. I'll come back tomorrow evening to check on you. Goodnight, Mr. Potter.” Madam Pomfrey ushered the other two women out of the door and back down to the kitchen where the rest of their group was waiting.

“How is he?” Asked Daphne, as every eye in the room turned to them. Tracey, Luna, and Blaise sat up straight in anticipation of the news. Hermione was surprised that the only person, other than her friends and father, in the room was Mrs. Weasley. From what she remembered last year, there was always a group of Order members in the kitchen.

“He'll be fine, Miss Greengrass. I gave him some dreamless sleep potion, so he should remain asleep until tomorrow afternoon,” said Madam Pomfrey.

“Mrs. Weasley, where is the rest of the Order? Asked an anxious Hermione. I thought there would be more people here.”

“Everyone is out, but don't you worry about that, dear. Why don't you have some tea and head off to bed. Perhaps you could help the others find empty rooms to stay in, tonight. There should be plenty of space.”

“There were other attacks, weren't there. That's why I didn't even get any notices for underage magic use.” Hermione postulated.

“That's Order business, you needn't worry about it, dear. Now, off to bed with the lot of you. It's been a long night for you and you'll need your rest. Shoo!”

Hermione was about to object more, but before she could get a good head of steam, her mother touched her on the shoulder and said

quietly, but firmly. "The girls look tired, love. Why don't you show them to a room. You'll get plenty of answers in the morning." She finished off staring directly into Mrs. Weasley's eyes

"What about you, mum?"

"Well, I haven't spoken to Mrs. Weasley since your second year. I would love to catch up with her over some tea?"

"Yes, yes that would be lovely," said an anxious Molly. "Now, off to bed with the rest of you. You might want to change into some clean clothes, though."

"Oh! Our things! We left without anything. Dobby!" Called Hermione.

"Yes, Miss Grangey, you called for Dobby?"

"Dobby, we'll be staying here for the foreseeable future, would you mind going to get our things from the house? Harry will probably need his things, as well. Might as well bring everything of his, he won't be going to back to the Dursley's this year."

"Dobby will do."

"Thank you, Dobby. Come on, let's find some rooms for us to stay in. Mrs. Weasley, are Ron and Ginny here?"

"No, dear, they're still at the Burrow."

"Is that safe? Wouldn't the Burrow be a target?"

"They're perfectly safe, dear, Bill is home and he put up a great deal of defensive wards. It's not the Fidelius, but it would take a great deal of time for someone to get through. Enough time for them to either floo, or grab the Emergency Portkey Albus made for us. Each Order member has one in their homes, now. He came up with that precaution after Harry talked to him about you."

"As long as they're safe. Thank you, Mrs. Weasley."

Hermione shepherded her friends to some rooms on the same floor as Harry's. In fact, they chose the room across from Harry's and all stayed in the same room that night. All five girls in one bed. No one wanted to sleep alone. With the rush of adrenaline fading away, each girl fell asleep rather quickly. Answers would definitely be coming in the morning.

Chapter 6:

Daphne woke slowly the morning after the attack. She felt warm and content as she started to take notice of her surroundings. She was laying on her left side in an unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar room. She realized, as she became more aware of her surroundings, that someone was quite firmly cupping her arse. Her eyes popped open at that and she remembered that she and the rest of her friends had all climbed into the same bed to sleep last night. They had all wanted the comfort of human contact.

She felt that she had a person in front of and behind her. The blond head of the feminine body in front of her was tucked snugly under Daphne's chin and was using her left arm as a pillow. The blonde's left arm was wrapped around her waist. This was the hand that was cupping her bum.

The redhead rolled slightly to see who was spooned so tightly behind her, but could only make out bushy brown hair. Laying back to back with the grabby blond was another blond that Daphne could identify as Blaise, who was spooned closely behind Tracey. That made the owner of the hand, Luna.

Daphne thought she was the only one awake until Hermione moaned and snuggled in closer behind her and whispered in the redhead's ear. "Morning, Daphne. Sleep well?"

"Yes, surprisingly well. I could get used to this."

"What could you get used to? Sleeping in a bed with four other girls, or waking with a hand squeezing your cheeks?" Said Hermione with amusement.

"If it's the hand on your bum, I'd be happy to oblige." Luna happily replied, showing that she was awake as well.

"It'll be my foot on your arse, if you don't shut up and let me sleep," snapped Blaise.

"There, there, dear. I'll fondle your arse later, if you're feeling left out," Replied Tracey.

"Right." Hermione cut in, "since we're all up, why don't we get ourselves cleaned up and dressed. Then we can go check on Harry and get some breakfast." She didn't want things deteriorated as they had so many times over the past couple of weeks.

"Sounds good. Looks like Dobby has brought our school trunks in here. Hopefully the Death Eaters didn't have reinforcements go and destroy the rest." Said Daphne.

"Hm, it seems that when you are in a house under the Fidelius and don't know the secret, you can't remember anything outside of the room you are in. Fascinating." Stated Luna as she released her hold on Daphne's shapely bum and sat up.

"Can none of you remember anything other than this room?" Asked Hermione. Three head shakes was all she got. "Right, well, I guess I'll just have to lead you around until we get Professor Dumbledore here. Oh, I'll have to find my parents, too. Well, I'll just get us to Harry's room first, I think he has a bathroom connected to it. Grab your clothes, let's go."

"I am so glad you took us to that muggle shopping mall, Hermione." Blaise said with smile. "One thing the Muggles definitely have on magical people is clothing."

"Oh!" Luna exclaimed, "Dobby included Harry's birthday presents in the things he brought for us. Should we bring them to Harry's room as well? You said today was Harry's birthday, didn't you Hermione?"

"Excellent thinking, Luna," answered Hermione. "It'll be something nice for him to wake up to. Come along, now, ladies."

As she led the four other girls across the hall she knew the Order members were back because she heard voices echoing up from the kitchen. Hermione walked to Harry's bed, set down what she was carrying and grasped the young wizard's hand. It was very noticeable to her that the small tremors were still occasionally passing through

his body. The other ladies quickly followed her example and surrounded Harry, putting a hand on him somewhere.

After a moment of silent thanks, Hermione gathered her clothes and headed for Harry's bathroom. "I'm going to get washed up quickly, then I'm going to look for my parents. You lot can sort yourselves out after me."

Hermione spent half an hour searching for her parents. She found them sitting in a room on the floor above Harry's, having just woken up.

Celia blinked the sleep out of her eyes and said, "Good morning, Hermione. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing fine, Mum. The girls are getting cleaned up and changed in Harry's room." Said Hermione after she hugged her Dad and got a kiss on the forehead and a hug from her Mum. "He's still asleep from the potions last night. Would you two like to come to his room and get cleaned up, too? That way we can all stay together as you will get lost without me due to the Fidelius Charm. Then we can all head down to get breakfast together. Was Dobby able to gather some clothes for you?"

"Yeah," Replied Eric, "little fellow came back with damn near every piece of clothing we owned. He popped in with it after Molly showed us to this room last night."

Hermione and her parents joined the other girls in Harry's room where Celia hugged and kissed each girl on the forehead. This had become something of a morning tradition for everyone while the refugees were staying with the Grangers. Celia had immediately treated each girl with love and respect. Tracey took to it like a duck to water, having grown up as she had. Daphne and Blaise had to take a little time to warm up to the care given to them by 'Mother Granger,' as she was now called. Now, though, both girls looked forward to their hugs and kisses every morning. Luna just smiled radiantly and hugged just a bit longer than the others when it was her turn.

After an hour or so, the gaggle of guests were herded down the stairs to the kitchen by Hermione.

“Hermione!” Blurted a surprised Remus Lupin as he saw her walk in the door. He was sitting at the table with the rest of the Order members present. These were the ones who could most often be found in Grimmauld Place. Lupin was sitting on the place to the right of the empty head of the table. On his right was the clumsy, bubble-gum pink spiky haired Auror, Nymphadora Tonks, who when Lupin jumped, knocked her pumpkin juice across the table and onto fellow Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt. On Kingsley's right, was retired Head Auror Alastor 'Mad-eye' Moody. Both of his eyes were glaring menacingly at the troupe of unknown interlopers.

“How do we know it's really you, Granger? And who're all of these people you've got with you? Tell me something only I would know about you!” Snarled the crazed old man as he pointed his wand at the group.

Bill Weasley chuckled from the other side of Kingsley as he said, “Easy, there Moody. Put your wand down, no need to threaten them.”

“She still needs to answer, though. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!” Barked Mad-eye.

“I can't really tell you anything, seeing as you never really taught us. I'll tell Professor Lupin something, though.” Offered Hermione as she walked around the table and whispered something in the Werewolf's ear.

Lupin chuckled merrily and said, “It's her, Mad-eye, put your wand away. Have a seat, everyone. It's good you see you all, Miss Lovegood, Miss Davis, Miss Zabini, and Miss Greengrass. I'll have to admit I don't know the other two people you've brought with you, Hermione.”

“Introductions, of course,” said Hermione as she and everyone else took seats around the table. “Everybody, meet my parents, Eric and Celia Granger. Mum, Dad, these are a part of the order I was telling you about.” She began pointing at people as she listed their names.

“My third year Defense instructor, Professor Lupin, Aurors Tonks and Shacklebolt, retired Auror Moody. I'm assuming you are Bill Weasley, Ron's oldest brother?” At Bill's nod and charming smile, she finished, “and this is Fleur Delacour. She competed with Harry in that tournament in fourth year. I didn't know you were back in the country, Fleur.”

“Oui,” replied Fleur, “I 'ave begun working for Gringotts, and decided to join ze Order shortly after my return.”

“She's seeing my Bill, right now,” Molly Weasley butted in, as she returned to the kitchen. It was unclear whether her tone was pleased or not. She continued, “Can I get you some breakfast, dears?” already moving toward the stove to cook more. She had argued with Dobby over cooking duties the previous night after the teens had gone to bed. Dobby had relinquished the cooking duties to Molly, but was determined to clean 'The Great Harry Potter, sir's house.' Other than delivering clothing and possessions, he hadn't been seen since.

As Molly began producing various breakfast foods as quickly as only a mother of seven children could, Remus leaned forward to look down the table at the girls. He asked, “How did such a large group end up with you, Hermione, and why are you here, now? I thought you weren't due to show up for another few days.”

Daphne actually fielded the first part of Lupin's query, “The three of us,” she said, indicating the Slytherins, “are refugees of a sort. We were going to be pressured into joining the Death Eaters soon, so we worked it out with Harry and Hermione for them to keep us safe and hidden this summer. We stayed for about three weeks at Harry's, then the rest until now with Hermione.”

Luna cut in with, “The Grangers were gracious enough to allow me to stay with them this summer, as my father left the country to give aid to his brother.”

“We're here,” Eric spoke up, “because we were attacked last night. Five of these Death Eater blokes and a giant snake came in around midnight. Are you alright, Molly?”

Molly had paused and paled at the mention of the snake. "Oh, yes, it's just...that might have been the same snake that attacked my Arthur last Christmas. Harry had a vision and Arthur was saved."

"It was the same snake, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said gently, "and Harry killed it last night. I think it was Voldemort's familiar." The Weasley matriarch started at the name, but then slumped a bit in relief at the news.

"Harry killed three other Death Eaters, too," added Blaise. Everyone around the table who hadn't been there leaned in as, between the seven new-comers, they retold the story of the previous night.

"Tonks and I will go and check out your house after breakfast," said Kingsley, "once we find out if it's safe, we can bring one of you back to gather whatever possessions you might need. It probably won't be safe to stay there for some time."

"Thank you, Kingsley, was it?" Replied Eric. The large black man nodded.

"Now, judging from the amount of bandaging that you lot are wearing, I'm going to assume that there were other attacks last night. What happened?" Asked Hermione quite bluntly.

"Now, Hermione, dear, you really don't need to worry about all that," Molly coddled.

Celia Granger frowned to herself behind Molly's back at how patronizing this woman was to her daughter, but before she could open her mouth to say anything, Bill spoke up first.

"Mum, we might as well tell them now. They'll certainly read about it in the Prophet. They'll just have a better chance of getting the truth if they get their information from us."

"Fine." Molly said petulantly as she turned around to continue cooking, banging the pots and pans a little louder than necessary. Eric looked at his wife with a single raised eyebrow.

Fleur took up the tale, “Zere were six ozzer attacks last night. We were able to stop three of zem.”

“Hm, seven. Magically strong number. I'm assuming these also took place after midnight?” Asked Daphne.

“As far as we could tell, all of the attacks started right at midnight.” Supplied Tonks. “Madam Bones, her niece Susan, and Susan's friend Hannah Abbot, who was visiting, were able to hold off a group of Death Eaters until back up arrived. They were all injured enough that they required a stay overnight at St. Mungo's, but they survived. Minister's Scrimgeour and his guards were also able to hold off their attackers long enough for back up.”

Lupin spoke quietly, “Amos Diggory and his wife were killed in an attack led by Bellatrix Lestrange. He had just been named Senior Undersecretary in place of Umbridge. A couple of Giants and about fifty Dementors were sent to the small town of Atwick on the eastern coast. It was completely leveled, all three hundred or so townspeople were killed or kissed. Ollivander, the wand-maker is gone. He was living above his shop and they broke in and took him. We don't know why, yet.”

“What was the last attack. That was five, you said there were six, what was the last?” Asked a green Blaise.

Moody's gruff voice told the rest of the tale, “He sacked Azkaban. He sent in about sixty Death Eaters, a hundred and fifty Dementors and another two Giants and broke into the prison. They killed or kissed every guard and went from cell to cell asking the prisoners to join with you-know-who. If they said yes, the Death Eaters took the prisoner with them, if they said no or were too weak to be of any use, they were killed. As far as we can tell, the Dark Lord added another hundred followers to his army.”

Silence reigned as each person digested the information. They could only come to one conclusion. The second war with Voldemort was truly under way.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Harry returned to the land of the conscious slowly as the dreamless sleep potion finally wore off. He lay silently, taking in his surroundings and allowing his memories to re-engage and decipher where he was. Once he realized he was in bed in Sirius' old room at Grimmauld Place, his eyes popped open and he sat up straight, looking wildly around the room.

He calmed when he felt Hermione's hand on his shoulder as she handed him his glasses. His body let him know that he was not completely recovered as he poked himself in the eye with his glasses because of a strong tremor that ran through him.

"Dammit," cursed Harry as he rubbed his eye and slipped his glasses carefully onto his face. His vision restored, he looked around the room to see who else was there. Hermione was sitting up on his right side in the huge bed with her hand still on his shoulder and a book in her lap. Daphne was in the bed on his other side. She looked like she wanted to place a reassuring hand on him, but was reluctant. Tracey and Blaise were sitting opposite Hermione and Daphne in the bed. They were facing each other and Tracey seemed to be painting Blaise's toenails purple. Hermione's mother was sitting in a chair on the right side of the bed with Luna sitting in a chair in front of her, facing away. Celia had obviously been brushing Luna's hair, as the brush was still in her hand. Luna had a copy of the Quibbler laying in her lap. Eric Granger was on the left side of the bed, he was looking at Harry over a copy of the Daily Prophet.

The scene looked so domestic and peaceful to Harry. He felt separate from it, like he was interrupting it.

Just as the silence was starting to get uncomfortable, which was a matter of seconds, Hermione answered the questions that Harry always asked when he woke up in the hospital wing.

"It's just past noon, you've only been asleep since last night, and we're all fine."

Harry sagged against the headboard in relief at the last bit of news. He opened his eyes again and looked around, visually checking to

see that everyone was, indeed, alright. Satisfied he said, "It's so good to see you all again. I m-m-m-missed you." He stuttered at the end as more tremors shook his body.

"Harry, we've never met properly before, but I'm Eric Granger and that's my wife Celia." Eric gracefully diverted attention from Harry's stutter.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Granger." Said Harry shyly and with a grateful glance at Eric.

"No, Harry," Celia spoke earnestly, "the pleasure is all ours. After what you did for us and the girls last night, we'll forever be in your debt. I don't know how we'll ever be able to repay you, but thank from the bottom of our hearts."

Harry blushed furiously at the praise, of course. "You'll never owe me anything, Mrs. Granger. I just did what I could." He paused and looked around for a change of topic before she could speak again. Spotting the Daily Prophet, he asked, "What's the latest news in the Prophet?"

The other occupants of the room shared long glances, before Hermione, with the help of everyone else, told Harry everything that had been told to them that morning. Harry was glad that the Boneses, Hannah, and the Minister were ok, but was saddened by the death of Amos Diggory. He was horrified at the news of Atwick and Azkaban, but then turned introspective at the news of Ollivander's disappearance. Getting Harry filled in and the following discussion took a couple of hours, so before they knew it, Madam Pomfrey was knocking and entering Harry's room.

"Good Afternoon, Mr. Potter," started the Healer, "how are you feeling today? Any residual pain?" She asked, as she pulled her wand and began checking him over.

"My shoulder is a bit tender, and I keep having tremors r-r-r-run through me. Other than that, I'm fine. Couldn't keep you away from me, could I?" Harry ended with a half-smirk. He added, "I'm sure you miss me in the summer," grinning now.

"I do find a nice chat over a cup of tea a decent way of catching up with someone, you know. I don't need to have someone in a hospital bed to keep in touch." Poppy responded wryly. She was a bit concerned as she could tell that the emotions coming from Harry felt a bit forced. Hopefully being surrounded by friends for the next month would help him.

"I'll try and remember that come September," added Harry, "now, how soon can I get out of bed?"

"Well, if you promise to be careful, you can get out of bed now. Your shoulder will be tender until tomorrow, but I'll leave a pain potion for you in case it gets too bad. The tremors will have to work themselves out, they should be gone in three or four days. Contact me if they last longer. You lot will make sure he doesn't over exert himself, right?" Poppy looked at all of the other people in the room with a raised eyebrow. Getting nods from everyone, she continued, "I will see you back at school, Mr. Potter. Hopefully for a cup of tea instead of some injury."

"Thank you once again, Madam Pomfrey, for your excellent care," said a sincere Harry.

Conversation started to pick up again with the matron's departure, when another knock on the door sounded and Professor Dumbledore entered, a grandfatherly look of care and concern upon his face.

"Ah, Harry, it is good to see you up and about once again. How are you feeling, my boy?" Dumbledore spoke kindly.

Harry bristled almost imperceptibly, but Hermione caught it. She wondered why Harry would be angry at the Headmaster, but her conversation with Harry at the end of term came back to her. Hopefully he would be ready to share this secret, now that they were all together.

"I'm fine, Professor, how are you?" Harry spoke with a mask of politeness and cheer. Until his next sentence, that is. "Any news you'd like to share with us? Anything you might have missed telling

me when I saw you a few days ago?" A hint of anger was showing through in his face and voice as he spoke the last.

"I'm not certain as to what you are referring, Harry. I believe I have shared all pertinent information with you." Dumbledore was obviously truly confused. He couldn't remember what he hadn't told Harry.

At the Headmaster's slightly confused expression, Harry continued, "Exactly how many of the Death Eaters that were captured at the Ministry are currently in jail? My guess is none, seeing as I was hit by the cruciatus from Dolohov's wand just last night. It would have been nice to know that they were still out there, seeing as they were Voldemort's most deadly followers."

"Ah, yes, well with the excitement of our meeting with the Minister, I had forgotten that bit of news. I hope you can forgive me, Harry. I meant no harm by it."

"Fine, an honest mistake. I forgive you." Harry spoke quickly and flatly. He made sure not to make eye contact with Dumbledore, lest the old man discover his lie. Harry didn't believe the Headmaster 'forgot,' he thought it was just another lie. Harry's trust in Dumbledore was gone, but that didn't mean that the white haired wizard didn't have his uses. Harry had decided earlier in the week to get as much as possible from Dumbledore without giving anything back. The just turned sixteen year old wizard thought that it was the only way he would be able to protect his friends.

"Thank you, Harry, that is very gracious of you," Dumbledore replied in his grandfatherly way. The Grangers were watching this conversation with a great deal of interest. They had never had an encounter with the Headmaster before. "Shall we move on to more pressing matters?" He continued.

"What would you like to discuss, sir? I'm assuming you're going to tell me what my training regimen will be?" Daphne noticed the subtle emphasis Harry put on 'tell me', but the old man completely missed it, happy that his relationship with Harry was getting closer to how it should be.

"Yes, indeed, Harry. You shall start tomorrow morning with Kingsley, he requests that you be ready to go at six a.m. He will work with you until breakfast at eight o'clock. After breakfast Moody will work with you on dueling and tactics for three hours, Ms. Tonks and Mr. Lupin will join you occasionally to aid him. After lunch, you may study or practice whatever you wish. If you need suggestions, or additional instruction, I will gladly aid you, or arrange someone who can. The time from dinner and beyond are yours. Does this sound acceptable?"

"Yes, sir, very acceptable," Harry replied shortly, "is there anything else you needed?"

"I wanted to discuss your living arrangements. I realize that you may not be comfortable living here-"

Seeing where the Headmaster was headed, Harry cut him off quickly. "Yes, I hate being here, sir, but this is now my house. Hermione's parents will be safest here, as will the other ladies that you have noticed and will no doubt be asking me about next. I will not leave them alone in this place. Period. Move on." The firmness of Harry's voice told everyone in the room that he would not be budging on this topic. It was very touching to Hermione, her parents, and the others; Harry was willing, once again to brave through pain, this time emotional, to make sure they were safe.

Dumbledore was going to try to persuade the stubborn wizard anyway. "Harry, I appreciate what you are trying to do for your guests, but the Weasleys went to quite a bit of trouble to put up extra defensive wards just so they could have you safely at their home. It would be good of you to see that their efforts were not in vain."

Hermione was absolutely outraged at the guilt trip that Dumbledore was putting on Harry. She was about to open her mouth, but Harry's subtle squeeze of her knee told her to keep quiet. This further degraded the already rocky opinion of authority figures in Hermione's mind. Celia and Eric shared a look of raised eyebrows at the conversation going on before them, communicating volumes just with their expressions. They were surprised at the level of maturity Harry was showing, and astonished at what the Headmaster was trying to

do. The three Slytherins smirked at each other as they recognized the oldest trick in the manipulation handbook, they were eagerly waiting to see how Harry handled it. Luna merely rolled her eyes and kept reading her copy of the Quibbler.

Harry immediately returned fire in a polite, but firm voice. "I appreciate the Weasleys putting in such an effort to keep me safe, sir, but the simple fact that it also keeps their family and home safe is enough that their attempt was not in vain. So, if you would kindly pass on my most sincere regrets to Mrs. Weasley, I'll be staying here for the duration of the summer. I would not be averse to setting up a time to visit them, and they are more than welcome to visit me, while I'm not training. I would not be a very good host if I were to abandon my guests at the drop of a hat, sir, now would I?"

"Very well, Harry. I shall pass along your message, though I expect Ronald to be most disappointed." Dumbledore paused, letting this set in, before continuing, "This does bring up the rather intriguing circumstances that brings you all here. I understand why Ms. Granger, her parents and Ms. Lovegood are here. I am pleased that you were able to escape the attack unharmed. Kingsley and Ms. Tonks have finished checking your home. Nothing was damaged bar the living room. They found four bodies, a snake, and the sword of Gryffindor. Apparently Dolohov escaped. They will be able to take you back there the day after tomorrow to pack up any of your other possessions, if it is convenient for you. Simply let them know at dinner." Dumbledore directed the last to the Grangers who nodded their agreement.

"Back to topic," the old man continued, "I find myself most curious as to how Ms. Davis, Ms. Zabini, and Ms. Greengrass came to be in your company, Harry."

Already tired of this conversation, the younger, bespectacled wizard replied quickly, "They came to me asking for help and protection. I gave it to them. After two weeks at home, they came to stay at Privet Drive with me for three weeks, then they stayed at Hermione's until last night, when they were attacked and we all came here."

“That was not the wisest course of action, Harry. You should have come to me, I would have been able to find a much more suitable place for these young ladies to stay.”

“I believe they came to me for a reason, sir. I wasn't going to betray their trust in me. It all worked out in the end, though, sir, they are safe and so am I.”

“Hm,” Dumbledore conceded, knowing he didn't need to fight this battle, “very well, then Harry. I would like to hear the events leading up to your arrival here.”

“Before we do that, sir, could you explain to my guests where 'here' is? And also, is there a way to redo the Fidelius Charm? I would like to be able to control who does and does not have access to my own house,” Stated Harry.

Albus stated clearly, “The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix is located at Number 12 Grimmauld Place. As to your second question, Harry, we would need to break down the existing Fidelius Charm and put up a new one. Unfortunately, I do not have the time to do this at this moment, but I promise that I will try to arrange a time in the future. If there is nothing else, I must adjourn back to Hogwarts, Harry your training starts tomorrow morning. Goodafternoon, all.” And with that, Dumbledore slipped out of the room and left the house.

As soon as she was sure the old man was gone, Hermione immediately snapped her attention to her friend. Interrupting a couple of other minor conversations that had started, she demanded, though more kindly than she might have done before, “Okay, Harry, spill. What the hell was that? Why were you so cold to Dumbledore?”

“That was cold?” Asked an incredulous Celia.

“If you know me as well as Hermione does, it would be easy to see through my lies and false politeness,” Harry said quietly.

“When did you lie, Harry?”

"When I said I forgave him. I don't; not for any of it. I don't trust him anymore, either. He is using me." Harry's voice was devoid of all emotion, but the hurt and anger in his eyes was plain for all to see.

"What happened Harry? You said that he kept something from you, and that you would tell me about it later. I think it's time, don't you?" Hermione's voice cut through his anger once again and he sighed and leaned back into his pillow.

"The prophecy." Harry said quietly. "The one that we fought over in the Department of Mysteries. It says that I am the only one who can kill Voldemort. Dumbledore has known it for as long as I have been alive. He has known it would be me for as long as I have had this scar." Harry tapped his forehead as he continued. "He knew what Voldemort was doing all year, he knew that the dark git was trying to lure me there. He knew and he didn't tell me."

The wizard closed his eyes and paused while everyone assimilated the information. After a few moments, his eyes opened, but they were staring at his feet. He couldn't look anyone in the eyes, not with what he was about to say.

He began speaking slowly. "I'm going to start training tomorrow. Training so that, while I know I will never have the power or skill of Voldemort, I will have enough that I can take him out with me. Don't interrupt, Hermione, you know it's true. He has, what, about forty years of dark arts knowledge on me. I can't possibly match that." Harry had cut Hermione off as she tried to offer assurances that he would live. Her argument fell short as she knew that he was right.

Harry continued, "I'm giving you all the choice that I don't have. Even though everything in me is telling me to cut you out of my life so you won't get hurt, I know that that isn't an option. What I want you to do, is take a few days and really think over how much you want to be involved. I'm going to give this little speech to Ron, Ginny, and Neville whenever I find the most appropriate time.

"Take the time, talk it over with each other or sit and mull it over on your own. Whatever you decide, I will not argue. If you want to cut me out completely, so be it. If you want to be trained as much as I am,

then I will spend every amount of free time I have training you as I am going to be trained. If you want something in between, fine. It's up to you. Daphne, Tracey, Blaise, I am still going to protect you to the best of my abilities, just like I promised."

Harry looked up to see everyone in the room staring at him with wide eyes.

Luna broke first, the small quaver in her voice the only hint at her deeper, hidden emotions, "Prophecies can be tricky things to decipher. Perhaps a new perspective on it will tell us something different than what the Professor thinks."

After a deep sigh, Harry said, "Alright, Luna. Before I was born, Professor Dumbledore was interviewing Trelawney for the post of Divination Professor." Harry had felt Hermione tense to give a scathing retort about how accurate a prediction from Trelawney could possibly be and headed it off, "I know, Hermione, she's a hack, but she did give an accurate prophecy in third year about Pettigrew."

"Continuing on, during the interview with Dumbledore, which was in a room at the Hogshead, she tensed and spoke in a raspy voice, 'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...'" Harry cut off his tale here, "Quick side note; at this point, the prophecy could have meant either me or Neville. A Death Eater had been listening at the door, but was found by the barman of the Hogshead and was booted. He scurried off and told his master. Thus, the reason why Neville and I grew up without parents. But the prophecy continues; 'And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives...The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies..'"

"Well, that's pretty direct." Said Blaise dryly. "I'm assuming your scar is the Mark?" Harry simply nodded.

“Do we know how you are equal to him?” Asked Daphne, “It could be that you are equal in power, now. And what is the 'power the Dark Lord knows not'?”

“I don't have near the power he has, and even if I did, he has so much more experience and skill that my power levels don't really mean a thing.” Harry answered calmly. He had already decided that there was no way he was going to survive this war. He had accepted his death as inevitable. “As for this 'power' that I have. Dumbledore thinks it's my ability to love. I don't know what that means. So, I'm going to do the best I can, train as hard as I can, and hopefully I can take the bastard out with me so you lot can live happy and fulfilling lives. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go get washed up. I'm stinky. I'll be out in a bit.” Harry said as he gathered up clean clothes and walked into the bathroom.

There was a long pause as each of the other residents of the room came out of their shock.

“Right, it's his birthday, yes?” Diverted Celia, “Let's gather his presents here on the bed. He can open them when he comes back out.”

“Erm, darling, don't you think we should talk about all this?” Asked a hesitant Eric.

“No, not while it's still so fresh,” Celia replied firmly. “Think on it overnight, and we'll discuss it tomorrow while Harry is at his training. For now, let's just relax and help Harry enjoy the rest of his birthday.”

When Harry exited the bathroom, it was to a yell of 'Happy Birthday!' from everyone in the room. He saw the pile of gifts on his bed and stammered, “You guys didn't have to do this. Thank you.”

“Of course we did, Harry, you're our friend.” Luna said with a smile. Harry made a mental note to find out the birthdays of everyone in the room. They would be getting the best presents from him this year.

“Come on, old chap, let's see what you've got!” Declared Eric jovially.

Harry gladly dug into the largest pile of presents he had ever received. The girls had apparently all worked together on this. He got piles of clothes. Every type of muggle clothing he could think of, it was there in the pile.

“Thank you, thank you so much!” Harry exclaimed enthusiastically.

“You're quite welcome, Harry. Now you can burn those rags that you've always worn before. We weren't sure about your size, but we can always alter the clothes with magic.” Tracey said as she picked up a pair of jeans and a green polo shirt that matched Harry's eyes, and pushed him back toward the bathroom. “Go, put these on, then come out and show us how they fit. Anything that doesn't look right, we can take back some other time.”

Harry put on a small fashion show for the girls. He was as surprised and pleased that they had gotten the right sizes for him on the first try as the girls were.

When dinner time came around, the group headed down to the kitchen. Harry entered the room and stopped, once again, as the room had a large number of Order members and a pile of presents on the table. Along with two of the most delicious looking cakes Harry had ever seen. Another chorus of birthday wishes being shouted at him had Harry's grin spread from ear to ear.

The group that was gathered included all of the Weasleys, bar Percy and Charlie (who was still in Romania), Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Hagrid, and Order members Remus Lupin, Tonks, Moody, Fleur, and Shacklebolt.

Harry saw the tips of Ron's ears turn red as the redhead spotted the Slytherins. He also saw that Ginny had a firm-looking grip on Ron's arm and was whispering furiously in his ear. Harry read the words 'not now' and 'bat bogey' on Ginny's lips. Harry was glad for this, he wasn't ready to have that confrontation, yet.

The group sat down and started in on the feast that Molly Weasley had laid out. Professor McGonagall leaned forward and said, “Professor Dumbledore sends his regards, Harry, but was unable to

attend tonight. He is dealing with some problems at the Ministry and couldn't break away."

"That's alright, Professor, I understand." Harry replied politely. He leaned to his right and spoke quietly to Ron. "It's good to see you, mate. Thanks for coming. How's your summer been so far?"

"Pretty boring, mate." Replied Ron, able to let the thought of the Slytherin girls go, so long as they didn't speak to him. "I've mostly been stuck at the Burrow practicing Quidditch with Ginny. She's thinking about trying out for the team this year."

"That's great! I wonder who the captain will be. I'll bet it's Katie."

The conversations around the table were kept to pleasant topics, an unspoken agreement that this was not the time to discuss the war. Dinner progressed pleasantly, Harry accepting well-wishes from those around him, Ron eating enough for three, and Tonks making people laugh with her facial transformations.

When dinner was over, presents were opened. Harry received books from most of the adults, sweets from Ron and Ginny, and pranks from the twins. Two gifts that stood out for Harry was the dragonhide wand wrist-holster that Shacklebolt, Tonks, and Moody had given him and the two journals from Lupin. The first was the personal journal of Remus, himself, and the second was a blank one, so that Harry could start his own.

After this came Ron's favorite event of the evening, the cutting of the cake. Harry asked about the second cake and was told that one was made by Molly and the other by Dobby. Harry called Dobby and knelt down to thank the excitable elf personally, causing the little guy to almost go into apoplexy.

People remained and mingled after the cake had been eaten. Harry had many interesting conversations; he spoke about his father's theories on transfiguration with Professor McGonagall, and his mother's theories on charms with Professor Flitwick (greatly impressing both teachers). He discussed pranks with the twins and Ginny, and more Quidditch with Ron. At one point, he led Hagrid up

to the top floor so that the half-giant could visit with Buckbeak. He congratulated Bill and Fleur on their burgeoning relationship and attempted to save the Grangers from Arthur Weasley's interrogation about muggles. Harry spoke with the Aurors about some of the defense texts he had read over the summer, including the one Moody had written. Remus approached Harry near the end of the evening, with Hermione and her parents following behind him.

"Harry, there is one more gift that I wanted to show you. Follow me."

Harry followed behind the adults, and beside Hermione, as they went up to the third floor. Remus walked up to a door and turned to speak to the others.

"Harry, Sirius spent a great deal of time in the last year researching a way to make this room possible. He wanted to have a place in the house where the two of you could share muggle things, since it's such a big part of your life. Hermione had also, apparently, spoken to him in the time before you got here about how she wished she didn't have to leave her parents behind when she came here." Hermione nodded when Harry sent her a questioning look. "So, I present to you what Sirius called, The Muggle Room."

Lupin opened the door and allowed the others through. Inside was a room that was completely unremarkable, unless you remembered that you were standing in a wizard's home. The room had a large screen television set in an entertainment center with a VCR beneath it. Large, plush couches sat facing the television. Electric lamps were arranged about the room to provide soft, comfortable lighting. It looked like a normal, muggle, family room. Harry loved it. There was a bookshelf with a small number of tapes on it. Three in particular stood out to Eric.

"He bought Star Wars?" Queried the muggle geek. Celia rolled her eyes.

"What's Star Wars?" Asked Harry.

"It's only the best set of films ever made!" Exclaimed Hermione. "How did Sirius know about it? I didn't think there were cinema's in the magical world."

"There aren't," replied Remus, "Lily took us to the first two when they came out in '77 and '80. She was muggle-born." Remus added in an aside to Hermione's parents. "Blew us completely away. Sirius bought those tapes before he even knew if he could get the television to work."

"How did he get this to work?" Interrogated(Queried, or Asked enthusiastically might sound better.) Hermione as she slipped into "student mode".

This, of course, caused Remus to slip into "teacher mode". Remus told Hermione of Sirius lining the walls with special Runes to absorb any ambient magic and shunt it to the wards. He had also painstakingly etched a series of Runes, in a repeating pattern, into yards and yards of electrical cable. Harry, who recognized some of the theory from his mother's journal, was equally intrigued. He just didn't understand the specifics as well as Hermione.

"Right, well, seeing as it's already past midnight and Harry has training in the morning, I suggest you shelve Star Wars for another night." Celia put her foot down and shuffled the teens off to bed. She then went down and did the same to the Slytherins and Luna.

All in all, it was the best birthday Harry had ever had.

Chapter :

Journal of Harry Potter, 1st August 1996.

So, I've decided to give this journal thing a shot. Moony gave it to me for my birthday yesterday. My parents, Sirius, and Remus all had one. I've read through all but Remus'. Read through Sirius' last night and during my down time today. Holy Crap. It has notes on every prank he and the Marauders ever played and how. Turning the Slytherin dorms pink was a great one. He also has detailed notes on ideas for pranks as well as his thoughts on the Animagus transformation. I still don't know about it. It's so time intensive, I don't think I'll have that kind of time to sacrifice to turn into something potentially useless. With my luck, I'd turn into an extra slimy flobberworm. Then there is the other stuff he has in there... I can see why he didn't want me to read this until I turned sixteen.

Wow.

He called that section 'Making Sex Magical. Both Literally and Figuratively.' Some of this I am gobsmacked over, other stuff I wonder what would happen if I used parseltongue for...Not that I'll ever have to worry about it. No self-respecting woman would ever want to be with me like that. The Boy-Who-Lived? Sure, they'd jump his bones, but plain Harry? No way. So, I'll push that stuff to the back of my mind and move on.

Training. This is what is going to take up my life for the next month, probably longer, but at Hogwarts, I'll be able to work in other subjects, too.

Sidenote: Just read over what I've written so far. Need to remember I'm not writing a potions essay!

Lessons are in a series of special rooms in the basement of the house. They're set up like the Muggle Room so I don't blow holes in the walls. First room is a huge gym with a track running around and weightlifting equipment in the middle. Second room's a conference room; comfortable chairs, a table. Very conducive to learning. Last room's kind of like a firing range/obstacle course mix. Perfect for

dueling/spell casting practice. It was a little bigger than the work-out room. Obviously expansion charms have been used.

Shack started out showing me how to 'fall correctly.' Already figured that out with the help of Dudley. If I hadn't, I would probably be in a wheelchair. Once I showed my knowledge of that, we moved onto hand-eye coordination. Needless to say, being a seeker, I passed. Then he had me run. A lot. A bloody hell of a lot of running. I ran for close to forty five minutes. He stopped me just as I thought I was about to die and showed me the weight machines. He said that with the work-outs I was doing that Oliver Wood showed me, I had a good base. He was just going to build on that. We discussed using potions to help along my development, we'll need to discuss the health benefits with Madam Pomfrey. He just sits there and watches while I run, telling me to run faster. Git.

Near the end of our two hours, he began to teach me Tai Chi. It's a muggle form of martial arts. Shack says it helps your focus, which makes it easier to perform magic. What he showed me was very relaxing to do as well. Mixing the Tai Chi with my meditation, I should have a much better lock on my emotions this year...still need to apologize to Hermione and Ron for being such an intolerable prick last year.

Met with Moody after breakfast for tactics for fighting wizarding battles. Not dueling, per se, but stuff like what happened during the attack on Hermione's. Used Dumbledore's pensieve for that. Apparently, it can project a memory out instead of us going in. It was really cool, it was just like when you dip your head into it. So, we watched the attack several times. He told me that I did fairly well, still being alive, but we also discussed what I could have done to come out better.

Man, Barty Crouch, Jr. was a decent defense teacher, but I sincerely wish the real Moody had taught us. We could have learned so much more from him. He's a really good teacher.

After that, Moony (he insists on me calling him something other than Professor, and I like the feeling of connection to my father.) and Tonks came down to help me with my spell casting. They were

surprised that I got through every book they gave me. What the hell else was I supposed to do all night? They think I'll be beyond N.E.W.T. Level in defense by the end of the summer. Maybe I'll get around another crap defense teacher.

Still can't sleep, by the way. The nightmares were worse than ever before, last night. I didn't even have time to slip into my mind-scape before I woke myself up. I think it'll take a while before I'm used to being back here.

Hermione is calling me into the Muggle Room. We're watching the first Star Wars movie tonight.

Just wanted to jot down some quick thoughts before I bunk down for the night.

Star Wars was the COOLEST thing I have ever seen.

I don't know what I would do without Hermione. She and the other girls are amazing. They gave me their answers and they're in. All of them. All the way. I still can't believe it. I still want to push them away, keep them safe, but I'd lose. What Mrs. Granger told me really meant a lot to me. She said, 'I think these girls are safest with you, not because you'll put them in bubble wrap and keep them out of danger, but because you'll recognize that danger is coming for them no matter what and will give them the tools they will need to handle it themselves.' She's right. I'm going to teach those girls everything I know now and everything I learn in the future. They will be downright deadly if I have anything to say about it.

We worked out that Hermione and I will go to the Burrow for a visit this Saturday. I'm of two minds about this. On one hand, it'll be nice to see Ron and Ginny and any other Weasleys that are around. On the other, I don't want to leave the rest of my friends here by themselves. After their assurances and finally, Mother Granger putting her foot down, we're going. I think the girls will end up accompanying the Grangers when they go back to their house to pack it up and collect whatever things they want with them here.

I'm very grateful Hermione's parents have decided to stay here at Mutt Mansion (Grimmauld Place sucks as a name. I'm trying new ones) for the foreseeable future. It is in the Muggle news that their house was attacked. The press is calling it an attempted robbery/murder. So, the Grangers are taking a leave of absence from work and will be staying here.

Well, that's it for tonight. I'm going to try to sleep. We'll see how it goes.

2nd August 1996.

Second day of training; pretty much the same as the first. I'm throwing myself into it as hard as I can. Need to get as good as possible, as quickly as possible. The time for skiving off studying and homework is over.

Dueled with Tonks today. Moody kept hollering at me to be more aggressive, but I didn't want to hurt Tonks. The curses I know now are pretty nasty. She used her metamorph skills to turn into Bellatrix. As soon as I saw that and heard her taunt me with that bloody baby talk, I kind of lost it. The first three duels between us lasted for upwards of five minutes, each. We would then take breaks to critique and heal ourselves. She won two out of the three. The last duel took eight seconds and Tonks was down with a broken arm, some serious cuts, and a concussion. I felt awful for hurting her, but she was good as new in a few hours.

Moody decided that he would try and get something else for me to fight against. Moony suggested a golem, Moody said three or four would be better. He's going to try and requisition them from the Auror Training Department. I'll ask what a golem is later.

Ron and Ginny came for dinner and they will stay through the Order meeting. Ron kept shooting dirty looks at Daphne, Blaise, and Tracey. He didn't say anything yet, perhaps because there were five girls there, all with their hands on their wands, glaring right back at him. Ginny mostly did nothing, but it was obvious she didn't want them there. I know that argument is coming, I just don't know when.

Perhaps tomorrow. Maybe I should just let him punch me. He can't hit any harder than Dudders and magic can fix me up right quick.

Anyway, we spent a pleasant evening watching films. We re-watched the first Star Wars film, then watched the second. HIS BLOODY FATHER!?!?! Who saw that coming? I loved every second of it. I can't wait to watch Return of the Jedi.

I believe Ron enjoyed the film, too. Throughout both films, it looked as though his eyes were going to pop out of his head. Ginny, too, for that matter. Hermione had said that she and the other girls had already gone to the cinema, so they were used to it. Hell, they're one up on me, since the Dursleys have never taken me. Bloody pricks.

Dumbledore delivered my Firebolt back to me, it's a little grungy, but otherwise okay. I'm going to sign off and polish it up so I can fly with Ron tomorrow. I can't wait to get up in the air again. I haven't heard whether or not I've been reinstated to the team, though. Even if I am, I'm not sure that I'll have time to play this year. I have to protect my friends.

3rd August, 1996.

Strange day today. Many ups and downs. Mostly downs. It started out fairly well. I've decided to get up early and run before Shack and I start our lessons. I feel like I'm wasting all that time with him just running. So, I started today. Five a.m., in the basement doing laps, no problem. No lessons today, though. Weekends off. Sundays I'm going to spend working with the Slytherins, trying to catch them up to where the DA was at the end of term. Patronus Charms wouldn't be a bad idea, either.

Can't decide if this was an up or a down, but, when I was just about done, I heard the door open and looked to see who was coming in. I fell flat on my face. Hermione, Luna, Daphne, Blaise, and Tracey came in. Apparently they wanted to work-out with me. They were all dressed in the shortest shorts I have ever seen, sports bras, and tank tops. They were all walking wet dreams. I had no idea any of them had bodies like that.

Apparently, while I was in my lesson with Moody, the girls sought out Tonks and Fleur. The two Order members showed the girls some stretches and exercises. Shack said that the key to cardio work-outs was to keep your heart rate up. No problems there! Not with them dressed like that!

Of course, being a red-blooded sixteen year-old boy, my body reacted accordingly. Unfortunately, the clothes I got for my birthday won't allow me to hide wood as well as Dudley's cast-offs did. I adjusted my weightlifting routine as necessary (read: bench press was right out).

Hermione and I floo'd to the Burrow. We chit-chatted with Mrs. Weasley for a moment to catch up. The twins' shop is doing very well, Percy is still a prat (which I knew), Charlie is still in Romania with his dragons, Bill has returned home and is dating Fleur (which I also knew). Mr. Weasley is toiling away at the Ministry, same as always.

We pretty much did nothing until after lunch, just played some chess. Teased Ginny about the owl she received from Dean. Just a pleasant morning. After lunch, we decided to play some Quidditch. We actually got Hermione up on a broom! It was a miracle!

First two games, we played Ron and Ginny against me and Hermione. Ron and Hermione as Keepers, with Ginny and I as chasers. I don't know what Ginny was doing. She went full-throttle against Hermione. As the game wore on, I could tell that Hermione was having less and less fun. She was clearly uncomfortable on the broom and with Ginny barreling down on her, it just made the situation worse.

After the second game, I suggested with switch teams, guys vs. girls. So, since I was still playing chaser, I was going at Hermione. I held back. A lot. Sure I took some ribbing from Ron and Ginny, but the look of thanks on Hermione's face once she realized what I was doing was worth it. She later admitted she actually had fun during the last game.

Dinner by Mrs. Weasley was delicious as usual, but things seemed...strained. Ginny and Mrs. Weasley obviously did not like the fact that Bill was dating Fleur, who were both there. Mr. Weasley and

Bill were either oblivious to this, or they ignored it. I chose to ignore it. Fleur's nice, once you get past that...Frenchiness, I guess is the best way to put it.

Anyway, Fleur asked about Hermione's parents. Hermione commented that they had gone back to her home and who they had gone back with.

That set Ron off. His ears went immediately red before he took a deep breath:

"How can you trust those snakes with your family, Hermione? And what the bloody hell are they doing with you, Harry?" Exploded Ron.

"Language, Ron!" Snapped Molly. She didn't interrupt the questioning, though. She wanted answers as well.

Under the table, Harry put a calming hand on Hermione's knee. With a look that kept her quiet, Harry began speaking, "Hermione let them go with her parents because she trusts them, as do I. They are with me, because they came to me for help at the end of the last term, and I promised to protect them." Harry's voice was calm and even, he was hoping that it would help to calm Ron down. It didn't.

"But they're SLYTHERINS! They're just Death Eater SPIES! They're EVIL!" Ron's voice was at thunderous levels, his whole face was an angry red, and spittle was flying out of his mouth.

"Not all Slytherins are Death Eaters, Ronald!" Yelled Hermione.

Ron shouted back, "What just because they said so you believe them? They're lying to you, Hermione! It's what all Snakes do! They must have corrupted you, Hermione! Come on, Harry, tell her that you agree with me." Ginny was nodding along with Ron's points, ready to jump into the argument at the appropriate point.

"I agree with Hermione, Ron." Harry's calm voice was just as jarring as the shouts from both Ron and Hermione. "They each gave me an oath on their life and magic not to betray me. I would trust them even

without that oath, though. I've gotten to know the three of them. They're good people."

Ron scoffed, "Impossible. They're Slytherins! No one from Slytherin is a good person. NO ONE!"

Harry lost his patience with Ron and bellowed, "The ONLY reason I'm not in Slytherin right now is because of YOU and MALFOY!"

This brought everyone up short. Ron's wide, disbelieving eyes turned to Harry. "W-What do you mean, Harry?"

Harry continued in a cool, emotionless voice, "The sorting hat said that Slytherin would bring out my greatness. But I had made friends with you on the train, my very first friend my age, and you were so against Slytherin, I didn't want to lose your friendship. That, plus Malfoy was such a prick,"

Molly snapped, "Language, Harry."

Harry said "Sorry," absently then continued. "I didn't want to be in the same house with him, either. So, I begged the hat to put me in any house but Slytherin."

Ron had turned white during Harry's revelation. As had all of the other Weasleys. Fleur had simply raised a single eyebrow at him, and Hermione was staring quite intently at the side of Harry's head.

"So, Ron, I should have been sorted into Slytherin. Does that make me evil? Untrustworthy?" There was real heat in Harry's voice, now. He was glad he hadn't yet revealed the prophecy to Ron. He realized that he couldn't completely trust the easily angered redhead.

"Maybe you are," sneered Ron, "maybe you've just been playing us all along! Maybe you were trying to get us killed at the Ministry, right alongside Sirius!"

Deafening silence reigned through the kitchen of the Burrow.

Harry shut down completely. "Fine. You don't trust me anymore, I won't trust you anymore. I'll be going. Thank you for dinner Mrs. Weasley, it was delicious. I don't think I'll be coming back for quite some time, though. Goodnight."

The devastated green-eyed wizard stood mechanically from his seat and marched to the fireplace, he tossed in some floo powder, and with a yell of his destination, was gone. As he was disappearing, he heard Hermione stand and begin to yell at Ron. Harry was unsure what the bushy haired tower of rage was saying, but Harry was sure that it was scathing.

The emotionally wrecked wizard tumbled out of the fireplace into the kitchen where the Slytherins, Luna, and the elder Grangers were finishing up dessert. Everyone looked up in surprise at Harry's entrance. He wasn't due back until later that evening.

Luna was the first to speak, "Is everything alright, Harry? You're back awful early."

Harry wasn't paying attention, though. His blazing green eyes were staring at the floor in front of him. His final comment to Ron about trust was echoing in his mind. He didn't even notice Hermione step out of the fireplace and stomp into the kitchen behind him, anger plain on her face. Before anyone could question her, Harry blurted out, "You lot are trusting me with your lives, aren't you? Well, the least I can do is to trust you with mine." He nodded as if agreeing with himself before he looked up and spoke in a clear, officious voice, "Tracey Davis, Blaise Zabini, and Daphne Greengrass, I Harry James Potter do hereby completely release you from any and all oaths you have made to me and all that they entail."

White light flashed between the three girls and the wizard, who then nodded his head, said a quick "Goodnight" to everyone and left the room. Once he got back to his bedroom, he locked and silenced his door, pulled out his journal and started writing.

So that's where things are, now. I have lost one of my best friends. I won't lie, it hurts. A lot. But, I've still got Hermione. She's always been

there for me, no matter what. I'm going to return the favor. No matter what.

I'm gonna sleep on it, see if I feel better in the morning.

4th August 1996.

Still writing books for journal entries. It's taking too long.

Sleeping on it did nothing, because I didn't bloody sleep.

I want to be surprised that Ron turned his back on me like this, but I really can't be. Not after fourth year. Bloody git. He won't even try to get to know the girls. They're just evil Slytherins and nothing they say or do will change that.

He's a bigot, just like Malfoy!

I need to get out of this room. Luckily Mad-eye, Moony, and Tonks had conjured up and shrunk all of those statues for me to practice on this weekend.

Harry tossed down his quill, changed his clothes and stalked down to the basement. It was still fairly early in the morning, so he didn't run into anyone on his way down. He wasted no time that morning; as soon as he got to the track, he began running. He spent a few hours going through the exercise routine that Shackbolt had shown him.

The meditation during Tai Chi helped the distraught young wizard regain control of his anger, somewhat. The boy could feel his magic yearning to be unleashed on something or someone and decided that it would be a good idea to do so. He pulled out the box of statues, enlarged fifty of them and let out his aggression and anger on all of them. The destruction started out with bludgeoning and exploding curses, but eventually as his anger spiked, he was lashing out with pure magic. When he ran out of statues, he would fix the ones he could, and destroy them again.

In two hours, Harry was exhausted and surrounded by a rather large pile of rubble. He stayed on his knees, breathing deeply with his eyes

closed for a long while. Finally, the door to the training room opened and Hermione walked confidently in, knowing that she was in no danger around Harry. The intelligent brunette was still cautious not to startle the dazed, boy, though. Accidents do happen.

She started when he spoke calmly, but with a sad tinge to his voice, "I know you're there, Hermione. You can walk normally."

Hermione quickly strode to Harry and wrapped him in a hug. "Come on, Harry, lunch is ready and you didn't eat breakfast."

Harry's eyes opened as he questioned his best friend, "What? No, 'how are you doing, Harry?' or even a 'What are you feeling?'"

"I don't need to ask because I know how you are doing and what you are feeling. You feel angry, hurt, and betrayed, just like me." Hermione replied.

Harry nodded in understanding, allowed himself to be pulled to his feet, and cast *Evanesco* to clear the room as they left.

The nervous wizard asked, as they joined the elder Grangers, Luna, and the Slytherins in the kitchen, "You don't think of me differently, now?" The hope and fear, although muted, was evident.

Hermione turned and looked Harry dead in the eyes as she responded, "Of course not, Harry. You're still my best friend. None of the others think of you any differently, either."

Daphne spoke up from her spot next to Luna, "It doesn't matter to us what some manky old hat thought your greater personality traits were when you were eleven. It matters who you are now, and that's our friend."

Harry gave everyone a grateful smile when they all nodded resolutely with Daphne's statement. Harry knew that they were not with him for protection anymore, they were with him because they wanted to be.

Luna broke the moment by saying, "Are you hungry, Harry? Dobby has made us quite the feast of sandwiches. He was quite pleased to

take over the cooking duties when Mrs. Weasley didn't come through. He even made some pudding!" The sparkle in Luna's eye when she said the last lightened Harry's mood considerably.

After a quiet, but enjoyable lunch, Harry led the group of teen witches back down the stairs to the spell-work room. They spent the time between lunch and dinner reviewing and learning the spells that were covered in the previous year by the DA, as well as the beginning of the work on the Patronus Charm. They spent the rest of the evening, after dinner, watching the final Star Wars movie.

Harry walked into his bedroom that night and picked up his journal and began writing again:

My relationship with Ron and the Weasleys may be damaged, or even finished, but I am in no way alone. I'm very glad for that. I couldn't push this group away, even if I wanted to. They are just too important to me, now. I just hope that doesn't come back to bite us later.

5th August, 1996.

Training today, nothing special happened. Had extra time with Kingsley today because I ran early, he focused on teaching me more Tai Chi. I told him how it helped me relax. He said that it really helped him when he was learning Occlumency.

We then discussed learning Occlumency and my inability to.

Found out that Snape is a son of bitch who just raped my mind. My revenge will be swift and unexpected. Kingsley will teach me the beginnings of Occlumency now. If we have time, we'll get in to Legillimency.

Moody said Order meeting this Friday will start right after breakfast, so that we can get through all of my memories. It is not going to be a pleasant day.

Found out what a golem is. It's essentially a magical robot that runs around and fires spells as programmed. After practicing curses and

target practice, I started dueling the golem. You can set the difficulty from first-year to Dumbledore, essentially.

We started out with just me and one. I can consistently fight it on Auror level. Moody wants me to be able to fight three Master Aurors at once, while the other three are firing curses at me from the sidelines by the end of the month. He's nuts, but I'll do it.

Something interesting happened when I was working ahead in Transfiguration with Hermione. I could feel my magic flow from me, and into the rock I was transfiguring into a cat. I wanted to experiment more, but Mother Granger made us put our books away and come spend time with them in the Muggle Room. Watched 'Batman' tonight. Gave me a few ideas for revenge on Snape. Ugly git.

Forgot to mention. Dumbledore showed up and said that the Order wants to see my memory of the attack on the Grangers. Told the old man that I would only give it up if my friends and I were included in the meeting. He reluctantly agreed. The meeting will be held Saturday morning after breakfast, core members only.

6th-8th August, 1996.

The past four days have been rather routine. The only thing of note to mention is that I've begun trying to feel my magic every time I cast. It's getting easier and easier. I'm beginning to wonder if I could cast wandlessly. I'm already trying to learn silent casting. It would be a huge advantage if I could attack without a sound or a wand.

I'm beginning to doubt allowing the Order to go through my memories tomorrow. I don't know what insights they could possibly obtain. We'll see.

I don't know if Ron and Ginny will be there tomorrow or not. I haven't had any contact with a Weasley since Saturday. Again, we'll see.

Kingsley has been providing me with a supplement potion that will give me results quicker. After just four days of it, I already feel a little bit stronger. It's only safe a little bit at a time. So, we'll use it to help

build my body up to where we want it to be, then I'll have to work to maintain it naturally.

Harry woke early the next morning as had become his routine over the past week. He quickly changed and went into the basement to exercise. The young wizard went through his regimen a little harder today, as he had a lot of nervous energy to burn. He hated having attention brought to him, and this meeting was just putting him in a huge spotlight. After his work-out, Harry ran up to his room, washed up and changed into a nicer outfit before going down to breakfast.

Celia noticed how tense the boy was immediately when she walked into the kitchen for breakfast. Mother Granger walked over to Harry and laid her hand on his shoulder. She was used to the involuntary flinch that he gave when touched, and, although it concerned her, she knew the teen was not ready to talk about it. Eric and the girls watched silently from their places at the table.

In her most caring voice she spoke softly to him, "Good morning, Harry. Nervous?"

The green-eyed wizard gave a wry smile and answered, "A little. It's not exactly going to be a happy thing, watching that awful fight again. I just hope we get something from it."

Eric, who had been listening to the exchange and gave his opinion then. "Even if there isn't some grand revelation that comes from this, it'll give the Order members a better idea of what happened and maybe how to prevent something like it from happening in the future. It'll be a huge benefit to them, no matter what. Trust me."

Harry spoke a quiet, "Thank you," before his attention was drawn to the kitchen doors as Headmaster Dumbledore strode in.

"Ah, good morning, everyone!" The wizened old wizard spoke jovially, "I have instructed the Order members to gather in your classroom. They all entered through the stairway near the front door so as not to disturb your breakfast. If you would like to join us, we can get the meeting started."

As one, Harry, his friends, and the Grangers rose and shuffled through the hall to Harry's meeting room. The Order had already gathered to get any preliminary items out of the way before they spent the rest of the meeting viewing Harry's memories. The table at the center of the room was greatly expanded and several more chairs had been conjured. The Order members present for the meeting were Harry's instructors, Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Snape, as well as Fleur. Also the Weasleys had turned out en masse, including Ron and Ginny. The two youngest Weasleys chose to ignore all of Harry's party as they sat down at the table. Harry guessed that Dumbledore had included them in the group of friends Harry had bartered for.

The head of the Order remained standing and addressed the group, "We have gathered here today to view the memories of the attack of the Granger household that Harry has so graciously agreed to provide us. Harry, if you would simply think of the memory you would like to show us, I shall extract it and we can begin."

As Harry stood to move closer to the pensieve, he saw Snape glaring at the Slytherins. Apparently the man could not hold his tongue because he shouted, "Davis, Greengrass, Zabini, what in Merlin's name are you doing here with Potter?"

Harry spoke before anyone else could, "They are here because they came to me, asking for protection. I gave it to them."

Snape sneered back at Harry, "What makes you think you could protect them any better than you did the Mutt."

Harry managed to keep his face neutral, even though inside he was screaming in pain and rage.

That is, until redheaded matron spoke in a condescending voice, "I agree with Severus, you're just a child, it's not your place to worry about things like this."

Harry raised his wand to his temple and began extracting memories, just as Moody had shown him to, as he spoke in a cold voice, "Just a child? When has 'just a child' ever gone through what I have and

survived? When have they lived through this? I have never been just a child.”

Harry had placed almost two dozen memories into the bowl, which was now full. As the enraged young wizard tapped the appropriate Runes to project the memory as it had in his training he spoke, “Let's see what the vaunted protection that the adults provided has wrought?”

When the young wizard tapped the last Rune, everyone in the room was suddenly standing in Number 4, Privet Drive. The memories they watched were no more than two minutes, each, but they showed Harry at various ages between two and ten being beaten, cursed at, and thrown into his cupboard. They saw him doing all of the cooking and cleaning while his tub-of-lard cousin did nothing but mock and laugh.

The memories paused at the tap of Harry's wand just after Hagrid had taken him out of the shack on the rock in the sea. He glanced around at the paled faces of everyone in the room, noticing the tear tracks leaking down many of them.

Dumbledore spoke up quietly in a choked voice, “Harry, I-” but was quickly cut off by Harry saying, “Quiet. We're not finished here. This next memory is of Ron, Hermione, and I trying to save the Philosopher's Stone from what we thought at the time, was Snape. Of course, this was after Professor McGonagall refused to believe us.” He paused before smiling softly at Hermione and continuing, “It also, incidentally, includes the first hug I ever remember receiving.” Hermione looked both astonished and mortified at this.

Harry hit the 'play' Rune and the memory started just as the three preteens were entering the room containing the trap-door and 'Fluffy.' He watched the reactions of the teachers as their traps were bypassed by the first year students; McGonagall looked mildly impressed at Ron's abilities at chess, Flitwick laughed and clapped as memory-Harry chased and caught the appropriate key, and Snape simply sneered as memory-Hermione solved his puzzle so quickly.

The still angry wizard spoke up after the memory finished, "One year down, one attempt on my life by the Defense teacher. This next memory will start when Ron and I went to Lockhart with the information that Hermione had figured out just before she had been petrified that had allowed us to figure out what was attacking the school and how."

He tapped the Rune and once again watched the reactions of the people around him. Everyone in the room were mortified at Lockhart's attempt at Obliviating the two young boys; both Molly and McGonagall were openly glaring at the Headmaster. Ginny was shaking like a leaf when the young Tom Riddle appeared, but a hand on her shoulder from Bill helped to calm her. He also translated the parseltongue when it was spoken. The memory ended with Fawkes flying the children out of the tunnels.

Everyone, bar Dumbledore and Snape, was staring at Harry with wide eyes. Hermione grabbed his right arm in a vice grip and said, "You said it was a 'good sized snake!' That thing was fifty meters long!"

"I didn't want you to worry. I was fine." Replied Harry with a shrug. Facing the others, he said, "Two years; one murder attempt, on attempt to wipe my mind. Excellent Defense Professors, don't you think?"

Tears filled the teen's green eyes when he realized what they would be watching next. He took a moment to mentally prepare himself to see Sirius again. Celia was alarmed as she visibly saw Harry push away his emotions. She was going to have a talk with that boy before he went back to school.

Harry spoke quietly as he tapped the pensieve once more, "I'm going to start this memory where Hermione, Ron, and I were confronting Sirius in the Shrieking Shack. It's kind of a long one, so we'll break for lunch afterwards."

This time, it was Harry that was watched for his reaction. Hermione was just as alarmed as her mother at Harry's lack of emotion; just one small gasp of pain when Sirius said "Those who love us never

truly leave us..." The brunette saw that Daphne, Blaise, Tracey, and Luna were all watching Harry as much as they were viewing the memory.

After the memory ended, Tonks breathed, "Merlin, there must have been a hundred Dementors that you drove away!"

Harry merely shrugged and called for Dobby to serve lunch. He was clamping down on his emotions as hard as he could. All of the pain, anger, and guilt came roaring back into him and it was all he could do to not blow up at the old man sitting serenely at the head of the table.

The atmosphere remained tense until Luna piped up, "Professor Lupin, you never said you were so close to Stubby Boardman."

Lupin spit the mouthful of tea across the table and replied, "Where did you hear that name?!?"

Luna answered, rather smugly, "Oh, daddy has been reporting Stubby Boardman sightings for years."

Ron, who had remained quiet blurted out incredulously, "You mean that rubbish in the Quibbler was true?!?"

"Well, the sightings most likely were not, but, judging by Professor Lupin's reactions, the name surely was." Replied Luna.

The former Marauder merely chuckled as he said, "Sirius used that name when he tried to pick up women in the Muggle world." The slight upturning of Harry's lips was the only way anyone could tell he had heard.

After the last person, Ron, finished eating, Harry spoke again. "I don't think I really need to go through the first two tasks of the tournament. So, we'll just jump straight to the third." He tapped the pensieve and clamped down on his emotions harder than before.

The level of respect in the eyes of most of the occupants of the room ratcheted up with every second they watched Harry struggle through this task. The respect melted into horror when the snake-like face of

Voldemort was finally reformed. The three Slytherin teens and Luna looked at Harry with undisguised awe when he stepped out to face down the monster. Remus' breath caught in his throat when the shades of James and Lily Potter formed out of the Dark Lord's wand.

The group expected the memory to end once Harry got back to Hogwarts, but it continued through the revealing of Barty Crouch, Jr. When the memory finally did end, Daphne spoke first, "Harry, what were you thinking when you stepped out to face him?" This was the question in the minds of many of those present.

Harry responded quietly after a moment of reflection, "I knew that I was going to die, I wanted to go out on my terms. I wanted to at least put up a fight."

Eric spoke, with pride in his voice, "It was a helluva fight you put up, Harry. A helluva fight."

"Damn straight," Moody added gruffly.

The raven haired wizard cleared his throat and spoke in a monotone, "The Ministry battle, from when we got caught in Toad Woman's office to when I left the Headmaster's office."

Said Headmaster finally spoke up, "Ah, Harry, are you sure that it's wise to reveal the information?"

Harry cut the Headmaster off with a sharp look and a venomous voice, "I think it's time these people know what they're fighting for, don't you Headmaster?"

"But Harry, the more people that know this information, the more chance that Voldemort will gain access to it."

"That git can come into my mind and take whatever information he wants, I'm pants at Occlumency, Snape saw to that quite thoroughly," snapped Harry.

The affronted Potions Master replied in his oily voice, "Don't blame me for your inability to perform the most menial of tasks, boy!"

Harry snarled right back, "Don't call me boy, Snivellus!"

Before the two wizards could come to blows, Shacklebolt spoke up, "Harry told me about your lessons, Severus. You did little more than rape his mind."

Harry broke in again, "We are not here to discuss the merits of Snape as a teacher, or lack thereof." Harry finished, looking Snape in the eye for a moment, before breaking off and continuing. "We're here to watch my memories, now on with the show."

Harry had actually broken this memory into two sections; before the flight and after. He didn't want to waste time watching themselves fly to London. Harry really didn't pay attention to the shock and indignation on the faces of Flitwick and McGonagall during Umbridge's interrogation. He was curious at the thoughtful looks that Moody, Lupin, and Shacklebolt had during the stand-off and subsequent chase. The green eyed wizard's fists clenched in rage when Dolohov's curse struck Hermione, his eyes began to glow in unbridled fury and pain when Sirius was knocked through the veil.

The only thing that kept Harry from exploding was Hermione grabbing his left arm, just above his elbow, Luna gently grabbing his right wrist, and Celia getting up to move behind him and squeeze his tense-as-steel shoulders. The teen received a few sharp looks at his attempted use of the Unforgivable, but the boy was unrepentant at the moment.

Jaws hit the floor with the revelation of the Prophecy. The room was as silent and still as death. Finally, Harry got sick of the staring and said, "So, there you have it. What was the final score on Defense teachers? One pass, because Moony wasn't in his right mind when he tried to kill me, one attempted Obliviation, and three murder attempts. I count Umbridge towards murder since she sent the Dementors after me. This final memory is the attack, from when I woke up at Privet Drive until we portkeyed away."

The final memory played, but Harry spent the entire time calming himself down. It wouldn't do to attack the Headmaster and his Potions

teacher right now. Before he knew it, the memory ended and, once again, everyone sat in silence.

It was Ron that spoke first, "Harry, mate, I'm-"

Harry cut him off before the redhead could offer a meaningless apology, "Save it, Ron. I'm in no mood." The tormented green-eyed wizard ignored the ever reddening of Ron's ears as he excused himself, "I'm going to bed. Goodnight." He walked to the pensieve in silence and collected his memories back.

Harry then stomped off to his room.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Back in the meeting room, after the troubled teen had left a silent Order in his wake, Eric Granger snarked, "Well, that went well, don't you think? I mean, what better way for a teenager to spend his Friday than having the people he looks up to the most drag him into a basement and have him relive his worst memories."

Dumbledore spoke his defense in his most grandfatherly tone, "In all fairness, Mr. And Mrs. Granger, we asked him here for just the one memory that he had already shared in his lessons with Alastor."

Celia continued her husband's point, "Sure, you brought him here for that, but then those two," pointing out Snape and Mrs. Weasley, "goaded him into revealing the rest. And what a great plan it was laying the world on his shoulders not even an hour after watching his godfather die. Are you trying to kill his spirit?" Mother Granger had all but shrieked the last at the ancient Headmaster.

The Headmaster serenely replied, "Harry is one of the strongest people I know."

But before Dumbledore could continue with his platitudes, Blaise interrupted him, "Everyone has their breaking points, Professor, and Harry is teetering on the edge of his."

The twinkling in the Headmaster's eyes dimmed slightly as he replied, "Thank you for your insight, Miss Zabini, but all will be as it should be soon enough. Once I have regained Harry's trust, I will be able to guide him where he must be to defeat Voldemort."

Hermione was shaking her head as she rebuked the man she once looked up to as 'the greatest wizard alive'. Her voice had a hard edge as she told him, "You speak as if regaining Harry's trust is an easy thing." Her cinnamon glare shifted to her former best friend, "It's not. Once you lose it, it's all but impossible to regain. Mum, Dad, girls, let's go, we're not needed here anymore."

With that the group who could truly call themselves 'Harry's friends' left the members of the Order in silence.

While those few he did trust were raking the old man and his Order over the coals, Harry was writing briefly in his journal.

10th August, 1996.

That was actually worse than I thought it would be. God, it hurts.

Chapter :

Journal of Harry Potter, 12st August 1996.

Saw that I haven't written since the Order meeting from hell. Still feel crappy, but I've been able to distance myself from most of it by pouring myself into the training. Mother Granger seems like she wants to talk, so does Daughter Granger for that matter. I know it's because they care, but I'm just not ready yet. Luckily, they seem to sense that and have let me be.

The catch up defense sessions with the Slytherin Sirens (face it, they're all gorgeous) have been going well. They've each got a bit of silvery mist for their Patroni. Hermione has a solid Otter and Luna has a solid rabbit. I don't exactly have a happy place right now, so I didn't even try mine.

I'm sleeping even less now, but it's giving me a chance to work on my wandless magic. I'm actually getting results! Started out with first year spells, wandless Wingarium Leviosa is not a problem. Can even do it wordlessly.

Training has really ramped up. They're pushing me harder and harder. Good. Keeps me occupied. We went over and over the Ministry battle. Going through what went wrong at each point. One would think I would become desensitized to seeing Hermione get hit or seeing Sirius fall through the veil. Nope. Hurts more and more every time.

Won't break me, though. No matter how much I want to give in and give up, I can't. Have to keep going. It's not the right time to die, yet.

Journal of Harry Potter, 14th August 1996.

Several things of note happened today. Moody, Shack, and Tonks each explained that Madam Bones has invited me to meet with her. Must not be too important, as she wants to schedule an appointment for the 27th. I agreed, if only to find out what she wants to use me for.

Got our O.W.L. results just after training finished. While I was in the shower. Hermione has no patience.

Hermione was sitting in the basement kitchen of “Mutt Manson” with her parents, Luna, Daphne, Blaise, and Tracey. They were chatting idly after Harry had finished his training. This was generally the part of the day where the girls would join Harry in his studying, often discussing theories or ideas presented in one of the journals Harry had received. Their knowledge and ability in Charms, Transfiguration and Defense was growing steadily.

The bushy-haired witch broke off her conversation with Tracey and her mother when the fireplace erupted in green flame and the stately form of her Head of House stepped out.

“Professor McGonagall!” Greeted Celia, when she saw who stepped through the fireplace. “What a pleasant surprise, what brings you to Mutt Mansion, today? Can we get you anything?”

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Granger,” replied the Professor, “nothing for me, thank you. I came by to deliver the Hogwarts letters and O.W.L. results for the students.”

Hermione gasped, paled, and started literally bouncing in her seat at the mention of the test results. The other occupants of the room shared a smirk at the eagerness of the studious Gryffindor.

Daphne teased her friend gently, “Breathe, Hermione, you'll not be able to read your results if you pass out.”

Professor McGonagall glanced around the room, while chuckling, and asked, “Where is Mr. Potter? I have his results, as well.”

The maniacally eager young witch popped from her seat and practically screamed, “He's in his room! I'll get him!” Before she sprinted out of the kitchen and up the stairs. The other teen witches looked at each other for a moment, before running after their crazed friend.

Eric wondered aloud, “You think Harry's out of the shower yet?”

A shout was heard from three floors above them.

“Guess not.” Celia noted with a chuckle.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Harry stepped out of the shower as he toweled himself off. He knew he could hit himself with a drying charm, but still preferred to do most things the muggle way. Most witches and wizards were lazy, often using magic to perform the most menial tasks. The young man did not want to fall prey to that since he found somethings refreshing to do by hand.

With the towel draped over his head, he didn't hear his bedroom door open. This was why the naked teen froze in place when the door to the bathroom burst open and his best friend yelled, “Harry! They're here! Our O.W.L. results have arrived! Oh, I just-”

“HERMIONE!” bellowed Harry as he cut off the over-exuberant witch's rant, bringing her back to her senses.

“Why are you naked?!?” Hermione squeaked as she tried to back out of the bathroom, only to bump into Tracey who was coming in.

“Probably because he was getting out of the shower.” said the blond Slytherin.

“Oh, are we going to open our letters in the bathroom?” asked Luna as she, too, filed into the bathroom. Harry was still frozen in shock as all of the teenage witches currently living in the house poured into his bathroom. The Ravenclaw continued, “Should we be getting naked, too?”

Harry's body betrayed him when presented with the thought of five attractive, naked witches sequestered in a bathroom with him. When Luna began tugging at her shirt he suddenly remembered he was baring all of himself to the girls, and wondered how he'd not realized it. He quickly covered his growing appendage with the towel and held a hand in front of his face. He squeaked, “No, Luna!” And that was all he was able to get out at what was the most embarrassing moment of his life to date.

“Impressive,” Blaise noted wryly, “apparently they can be used as towel racks.”

“Hm,” Daphne noted, intrigued, “his carpet matches his curtains, too.”

By this time, Harry had returned to his senses and shouted, “OUT! EVERYONE OUT!” His voice seemed to be amplified by a Sonorus as the sound reverberated around the room. The startled witches shrieked and ran back downstairs to rejoin the amused adults. Harry finished drying himself off, threw on some clothes and followed them down to the kitchen.

“Good afternoon, Professor McGonagall,” Harry greeted quite loudly to cut off any possible ribbing he might have received. “Hermione tells me that you've brought our O.W.L. results.”

“Indeed I have, Mr. Potter. I was quite intrigued when I received your scores. Would you care to explain?” The Professor asked with a raised eyebrow as she passed out the letters. Each of this year's sixth year students received two letters, while Luna received only her standard Hogwarts letter.

Harry's heart felt like it was trying to escape through his toes as he opened his letters. Hermione was alternately looking at Harry and her scores with a face full of anxiety. He quickly pulled his

out of the envelope and read through the results.

“Ordinary Wizarding Level Test Results:

Harry James Potter:

Pass:O-Outstanding, EE-Exceeds Expectations, A-Acceptable

Fail:P-Poor, D-Dreadful, T-Troll

Class Grade O.W.L. Notes

Transfiguration O 1 None

Charms O 1 None

Potions O 1 None

Defense Against the Dark Arts O 1 Highest Score of Class

Herbology EE 1 None

History of Magic T 0 None

Care of Magical Creatures O 1 Highest Score of Class

Astronomy A 1 None

Divination P 0 None

Muggle Studies - - None

Ancient Runes - - None

Arithmancy--None

Total O.W.L.'s received: 7/9"

Harry simply stared at his test scores in shock, with what Professor McGonagall had said, he thought he had failed out of school. Hermione, seeing the color drain out of Harry's face, quickly grabbed his results out of his hands and read over them, with her parents leaning over her shoulder.

Celia spoke up, "I don't see the problem, these look like excellent results." When Hermione had finished reading, she looked up at Harry with a calculating glint in her eyes.

The transfiguration professor answered, "The problem, is that Mr. Potter's homework and test grades do not match up with the scores he received. If I didn't know Mr. Potter as well as I do, I would think he had cheated." Harry's head snapped up at that and an angry flush started to rise in his cheeks. McGonagall continued, "Since I know

that you would never cheat, I would like to know the reason behind the discrepancy.”

Before Harry could answer, Eric intervened, “I don't understand, what kinds of scores does Harry normally get?”

Hermione answered her father, “His scores are normally A's and EE's. He usually doesn't do much more than what is required, except in Defense. What's going on, Harry?”

The green-eyed wizard's angry flush had melted into an embarrassed blush. He nervously scratched the back of his neck with his left hand and looked down at the table as he began to speak softly. “Well, when I was first starting primary school, I found that I really like reading and classes. I would bring home my good scores to the Dursleys, but they would just yell at me for showing off. When my first grade teacher brought them in for a conference and asked them why Dudley wasn't doing as well as I was, they beat me for cheating when they got home. I didn't eat for two days after that. So, I learned to hide my intelligence, never doing better than Dudley, who fails pretty much everything.”

Blaise cut Harry's story off when she asked, “But why wouldn't you try harder when you got to Hogwarts? They couldn't blame you for doing better than that whale, then.”

Harry smirked at Blaise's description of his cousin before he continued, just as softly as before, “Well, the very first friend my age that I ever made was Ron. I wanted so badly to fit in, that when he teased you about studying, I knew I had to keep it hidden, still. I usually did my extra reading after everyone else had gone to bed. I am sorry about that, Hermione. I should have stood up to him sooner instead of conforming to his views.”

Hermione sniffed back the tears at Harry's mistreatment and spoke warmly, “Oh, Harry, you were forgiven when you saved me from the troll.”

Harry shook his head, “Still, that's not good enough, Hermione. I still let him treat you that way even afterwards, we made it seem like we

were only interested in you for your homework help. It isn't that way at all. I like you for you, Hermione, and I'll try to make it up to you from now on."

Hermione gave Harry a beautifully, beaming smile at Harry's validation of their friendship, "You can make it up to me by not hiding yourself anymore, Harry. Everyone here likes you for you, as well. You don't have to hide anything from us." All of the girls nodded at Hermione's proclamation. The young wizard was touched at the display of friendship and smiled his thanks to each of them.

The adults had tears in their eyes at the touching moment between the teens. It was broken when Harry cleared his throat and said, "Alright, enough of that, let's see your twenty O.W.L.'s, Hermione." He held out his hand, knowing that the beautiful bookworm's Gryffindor courage would fail at looking at her own results. The eager young man opened his best friend's results and read through, keeping his face perfectly neutral.

Hermione's patience quickly wore out and she yelled, "Come on, Harry!" She looked into his eyes and her breath was taken away at the pride shining the emerald orbs.

"These are brilliant, Hermione! Congratulations!" Harry exclaimed. He laid the page flat on the table for all to see.

"Ordinary Wizarding Level Test Results:

Hermione Jane Granger:

Pass:O-Outstanding, EE-Exceeds Expectations, A-Acceptable

Fail:P-Poor, D-Dreadful, T-Troll

Class Grade O.W.L. Notes

Transfiguration O 1 Highest Score of Class

Charms O 1 Highest Score of Class

Potions O 1 None

Defense Against the Dark Arts O 1 None

Herbology O 1 None

History of Magic O 1 Highest Score of Class

Care of Magical Creatures O 1 None

Astronomy O 1 Highest Score of Class

Divination - - None

Muggle Studies O 1 Highest Score of Class

Ancient Runes EE 1 None

Arithmancy O 1 Highest Score of Class

Total O.W.L.'s received: 11/11 Special Note: Most O.W.L.'s received this year.”

As everyone read through Hermione's results, the smartest witch of her age was passed around for congratulatory hugs and kisses. Even Professor McGonagall gave one of her two favorite students a hug, she spoke, “Well done, Hermione. I'm proud to tell you that you are ranked the top of the class and you have some of the highest scores since another young muggleborn,” as she spoke the name, she winked at Harry, “Lily Evans.” Hermione was blushing like a Weasley, but she was beaming with pride.

When the room had calmed, Luna asked, “How did everyone else do?” As a Ravenclaw, she was just as excited as the rest of them over their test scores. The other three girls laid their score sheets on the table as well.

“Ordinary Wizarding Level Test Results:

Tracey Marie Davis:

Pass:O-Outstanding, EE-Exceeds Expectations, A-Acceptable

Fail:P-Poor, D-Dreadful, T-Troll

Class Grade O.W.L. Notes

Transfiguration O 1 None

Charms EE 1 None

Potions O 1 None

Defense Against the Dark Arts A 1 None

Herbology EE 1 None

History of Magic O 1 None

Care of Magical Creatures - - None

Astronomy A 1 None

Divination - - None

Muggle Studies - - None

Ancient Runes EE 1 None

Arithmancy EE 1 None

Total O.W.L.'s received: 9/9"

"Ordinary Wizing Level Test Results:

Blaise Valentia Zabini:

Pass:O-Outstanding, EE-Exceeds Expectations, A-Acceptable

Fail:P-Poor, D-Dreadful, T-Troll

Class Grade O.W.L. Notes

Transfiguration EE 1 None

Charms O 1 None

Potions O 1 Highest Score of Class

Defense Against the Dark Arts A 1 None

Herbology EE 1 None

History of Magic EE 1 None

Care of Magical Creatures - - None

Astronomy A 1 None

Divination - - None

Muggle Studies - - None

Ancient Runes EE 1 None

Arithmancy EE 1 None

Total O.W.L.'s received: 9/9”

“Ordinary Wizarding Level Test Results:

Daphne Lorelei Greengrass:

Pass:O-Outstanding, EE-Exceeds Expectations, A-Acceptable

Fail:P-Poor, D-Dreadful, T-Troll

Class Grade O.W.L. Notes

Transfiguration O 1 None

Charms EE 1 None

Potions O 1 None

Defense Against the Dark Arts A 1 None

Herbology EE 1 None

History of Magic EE 1 None

Care of Magical Creatures - - None

Astronomy A 1 None

Divination - - None

Muggle Studies - - None

Ancient Runes O 1 None

Arithmancy EE 1 None

Total O.W.L.'s received: 9/9"

Harry wondered out loud, "Neville obviously got the high score in Herbology, I wonder who scored highest in Ancient Runes and Divination?"

Professor McGonagall answered the question, "Miss Padma Patil scored highest in Ancient Runes and Miss Brown scored highest in Divination."

Hermione squeaked as she opened her Hogwarts letter and her Prefect Badge fell out. "Congratulations, sweetheart!" Exclaimed Celia as she hugged her daughter.

"It's not exactly a surprise, though." Noted Harry with a wink. He wasn't surprised when no badge came from his envelope. "Ron still prefect?"

The Gryffindor Head's shoulders sagged as she nodded, "He is. His grades were high enough that he was able to retain his badge. He has also been named Quidditch Captain." Harry responded by sitting back in his chair, crossing his arms in front of him, and raising his eyebrows, prompting the teacher to continue. "Miss Bell has decided that she would be too overwhelmed to take the spot in her N.E.W.T. year and that evil little woman buried your ban in so much paper work that we were unable to overturn it by the deadline. Rest assured it will be overturned by the time you return to school, should you wish to continue playing."

Hermione was surprised when there was no flash of disappointment in Harry's eyes. He merely shrugged and said, "Good for Ron. I would have turned down the position anyway. I don't even know if I'll be able to play at all this year. I just don't know if I'll have the time."

"I understand, Mr. Potter. Though I wish you would at least remain on the team, I realize that there are more important things than Quidditch," admitted the Professor. "Now, one last piece of business before I leave. Professor Dumbledore asked that you wait until we can set up proper security for your trip to Diagon Alley. He said that proper arrangements could be made for next weekend, if that is acceptable?"

After getting nods from all those concerned, Eric spoke up, "I think that would be fine, Professor." He paused as an idea popped into his head. "Would you be able to arrange for a couple of Order members to go to the London Zoo with us tomorrow? It's been forever since Hermione has been there, and they deserve a bit of celebration for scoring so well."

Hermione leaped up from her seat and hugged her father, "Oh, daddy! That would be amazing! We wouldn't need too much protection, Professor. We would just need to walk from here to the tube. That will take us right to the zoo. It shouldn't be too dangerous in the Muggle London."

The normally uptight Professor crumbled under the pressure of six expectant and exited faces. "Very well, I will see who is available."

Now, if there is nothing else, I must be off. Good day.” And with a final wave, McGonagall stepped back through the floo.

“Well, we've got a little bit of time before diner, would you ladies like to accompany me up to the library?” Suggested Harry, “We can get in a bit of studying before we come back down to eat.”

There was a glint of something in Hermione's eye as she asked, “Is this a bit of the true Harry coming through?”

Not missing an opportunity to tease, Blaise quickly answered with a smirk, “No, we all saw most of the true Harry upstairs, and there was more than a bit of it.”

Harry turned beet red let out a manly, “Meep,” and scrambled up the stairs, the girls laughed gaily and followed behind him. They spent the rest of the day studying and relaxing as they had every other day during their stay at Grimmauld Place. Harry's heart felt just a touch lighter when he went to bed that night.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

“Good morning, Mother Granger,” Harry said as he sat down to breakfast. They were the only two in the kitchen at that point. The girls were upstairs getting ready for the trip to the zoo, and Eric had slept in a bit that morning, so he was getting cleaned up and ready as well.

Celia gave Harry a grin and said, “Good morning, Harry. Are you excited for the trip to the zoo?”

Harry nodded as he tucked in to the plate of eggs, fruits and toast that appeared in front of him. The older woman laughed and asked, “Have those people ever taken you to a zoo before?”

Harry swallowed and answered, “Actually, yes. It was my cousin's eleventh birthday, and they couldn't find me a sitter, so they took me along. I actually had a spot of accidental magic there. We were in the snake house and I was talking to one of the snakes,”

Celia cut him off and said, "You can talk to snakes? Is that a common ability among wizards?"

"No, actually." Replied Harry, "It's really rare, and only attributed to dark wizards. Really made my second year a pain when it came out I could do it, too. Everyone thought I was this great evil wizard, well, everyone but Hermione."

Mother Granger grinned and prompted Harry to continue, "So, you were in the reptile house and talking to a snake.."

"Right, Dudley saw that the snake was moving and knocked me down to get a closer look. When he was pounding on the glass, I made it disappear and he fell in. The snake escaped and said "thanks" to me, before slithering off. When Dudley tried to get out of the empty cage, I had made the glass reappear." Both occupants of the kitchen broke down in laughter. It was the first time Harry had laughed freely in weeks.

As the two calmed, Celia looked Harry in the eye and spoke in serious, but still kind, voice, "I want you to try something for me today, Harry. I want you to try to leave behind all your titles and your prophecy and all your other baggage, and simply be a guy out for the day with his friends. Can you do that for me?"

Harry stared into the motherly eyes of Celia and said with a bit of a thick voice, "Yeah, I'll do the best I can."

Mother Granger smiled and reached over to squeeze Harry's forearm. The moment was broken as they heard a clatter of footsteps coming down the stairs. Hermione, Luna, Blaise, Tracey, and Daphne, all burst into the room chatting amicably. Eric was not far behind them, so he still had to wait in line to give his wife a good morning kiss. "Good morning, love," he said as he did so, "what time are we leaving? Do we know who our escort is for the day?"

"You do now," Tonks exclaimed as she and Fleur walked into the kitchen, "just us two ladies today. Figure, since we'll have eight wands in total, plus these extra emergency Portkeys, we should be fine." The metamorphmagus handed out small leather bracelets to

each of the teens besides Hermione, who already had one. "The trigger phrase is 'Snuffles House,' it'll bring you right back into the house."

"Thanks, Tonks, Fleur, for coming with us today. We really appreciate it." Harry said gratefully.

"Eet ees no problem, 'Arry. Eet ees a beatiful day to be outside." Fleur replied. "Ees everyone ready to go?" She was greeted with excited nods all around. "Zen eat up and zo we can be off."

The day was as perfect as anyone could have hoped. For the first time in his life, Harry felt like a normal boy spending a day at the zoo with his closest friends. They all laughed when Harry translated what a rather surly boa constrictor was saying about the people passing by. He noticed the twinkle in Hermione's eye when they watched the Otters prancing and playing with each other, and gently bumped her shoulder. It was the most carefree any of the girls had ever seen Harry and they loved it. But it was not to last.

They arrived back at Grimmauld Place several hours after dinner time, having eaten at a restaurant near the zoo. They were greeted by the dirty and stunned faces of four of the Weasley family. Molly looked especially distraught, clutching onto Arthur's robes.

Harry stepped forward, Celia could see his shoulders set as the weight of the world settled back on him, as he asked, "What's going on here?"

Arthur stepped forward and spoke, "Death Eaters attacked the Burrow. Somehow they were able to bypass enough of the wards to get close enough to send blasting curses at the house. We were able to gather everyone around the emergency portkey and evacuated here. Harry, I know things are str-"

Harry waved off the Weasley patriarch's plea and said, "You can stay as long as you need. There are plenty of rooms open on the second floor. Fleur, Tonks, why don't you take Ron and Ginny up and help them get settled. Celia, Eric, please take Mrs. Weasley down to the kitchen, give her some tea. Girls, perhaps one of you could find some

a calming draught for her. I'm assuming the Order was contacted and they have been sent to try and fend off the attackers?" The last question was directed back at Arthur, who was staring at Harry in even more shock. The balding redhead nodded mutely, prompting the younger wizard to speak again, "That means we might have wounded coming through here, the rest of you, grab any healing potions we have and bring them down to the work-out room. It should be large enough to turn into a triage if necessary. Arthur, why don't you contact Madam Pomfrey and have her ready, just in case."

Everyone moved at once to follow Harry's orders, none questioning who was giving them. The rest of the night was spent waiting for the defenders to return, then treating their injuries. Luckily, none were severe enough to require the attentions of Madam Pomfrey. Once all reports were in, the Burrow was declared unfit for habitation, and the number of occupants of Grimmauld Place grew by four. Molly and Arthur, Ginny, and Ron took up rooms on the second floor. While Harry was still not on speaking terms with the family of redheads, neither would he turn them out on the street.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Journal of Harry Potter 18th August, 1996

The Weasleys are here. Bloody fantastic! I managed to avoid them all today, but I'd be kidding myself if I thought that the rest of the two weeks here will pass in peace. They're set up on the second floor, while my friends and I are on the third.

Anyway, the day at the zoo was fantastic. I got to be just Harry for a short time. It was something I really liked.

What surprised me is that Fleur got along really well with everyone. She really seemed to let her hair down, so to speak. She really is just a kind, intelligent person. I expected the girls to be snippy with her like most are, but everyone just relaxed and had fun.

Tonks was her usual, bubbly, clumsy self. Made it easy to get lost in the fun of the day.

Hopefully, our trip to Diagon Alley next weekend will go just as smoothly. We'll see, though. Best to just be prepared for the worst.

Journal of Harry Potter 19th August, 1996.

It has been two full days that the Weasleys have been here, and already things are becoming strained. The only times that we are all together are at meals. Ron glares at everyone for some perceived slight against him. Ginny, she's an odd one. She seemed to agree with Ron during the fight at the Burrow, but now it seems that she doesn't know what to think. Especially as she has seen how the girls interact with each other and me. Hopefully with time she'll be able to overcome the bigotry ingrained in her against Slytherins and make up her own mind.

Mrs. Weasley has decided that she is in charge. She already chased poor Dobby out of the kitchen. She also insists that I'm not eating enough. I worked out a careful diet with Kingsley to help me gain muscle and be healthier. She doesn't realize not everyone eats like her vacuum of a son. We have our routines set. It's worked well so far, she better not try to change it.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Three days later, Harry was finishing his morning exercises with Shackbolt. The two wizards were slowly working through the movements of Tai Chi to cool down and stretch their muscles and relax their minds. The calm was broken when they heard the sounds of shocked screams, Harry recognized the voices as Hermione and Daphne, then the angry and shocked bellow of Molly Weasley, "WHAT IN MERLIN'S NAME IS GOING ON HERE?!?"

Harry's green eyes had snapped open when he had recognized the voices, and was moving in a blur up the stairs so fast that Kingsley was sure the boy apparated. By the time Molly had finished her question, Harry was already dashing through the hall, approaching the room. He burst into the room, wand pulled, ready to defend against any perceived threat. The sight that met him made the tortured sixteen year old freeze in his tracks, green eyes wide, mouth open.

Hermione and Daphne were laying in bed together, naked. The smell of sex permeated the room. Harry's eyes unconsciously raked over the girls, starting their feet, up their smooth, creamy legs to where a single sheet lay covering them just enough to not show any of their privates. The sheet was pulled closely enough to them that Harry could make out the size and shape of their breasts. Daphne was frozen, tucked under Hermione's left arm, as the girls had obviously just been woken.

Green eyes locked first on purple, then brown, reading the emotions showing through. In purple, surprise, shock, and fear. In brown, shock, fear, and defiance. The girls read in Harry's eyes, shock and questioning.

By the time Harry's brain had processed what he was seeing, Molly's shrieks had brought the attention of the others in the house. Ron had come barreling through the door, just like Harry, and was standing in shock, also. Hermione's parents were standing next to Molly, a lack of surprise evident on their faces. Likewise, there was no surprise on the faces of Luna, Blaise, and Tracey, who were standing in the hallway, eager for a show before breakfast.

Harry's quiet voice rang out like a church bell in the silence that had descended, "What's going on?"

Molly blustered herself up to answer first, "I came upstairs to gather everyone for breakfast, and I found these two...like THIS!"

"And?" Harry inquired further.

Ron, eager to defend his mother and prove that the Slytherins were evil and corrupting Hermione jumped in next, "And it's disgusting!"

Harry muttered, but loud enough for the two in bed to hear, "Disgusting is definitely not the word I'd use.."

Molly, egged on by her son's defense, "To find two girls in bed with each other! It's UNNATURAL!"

Hermione and Daphne, who still had their eyes locked with Harry's, saw all of the warmth leave those killing-curse green orbs. They seemed gloss over, as if he were seeing something from his past, before his focus returned to the present. All of the warmth that the two girls saw whenever they looked into those green eyes faded into a cold hardness fueled by rage. Fear and uncertainty overcame the skyclad girls and they worried that Harry was furious at them.

"Get out." The feeling behind those two words, ground out between clenched teeth, washed over everyone that could hear them.

Tears filled Hermione's eyes as she looked at what might be her former best friend, "B-b-but H-h-harry. Where wi-"

"Not you," snapped Harry, before his eyes softened again and he gave his best friend a warm half-smile before his faced fell back into an emotionless mask. He turned to face the angry redheads in the room.

"You can't tell me you're defending them are you?" Shouted an incredulous Ron.

Harry's eyes began to glow subtly as he responded, "No, Ron, I'm not defending them because they've done nothing wrong. Now, get out of this room."

"But-" Ron tried again, but Harry cut him off, snapping "NOW" so angrily that it sent everyone running.

The angry wizard turned to his two friends, who remained in bed and spoke quietly, "We should probably talk about this, but it can wait until I'm done with training. Why don't we all meet in the Muggle room for dinner tonight. I'll go sort out the Weasleys."

Shaking his head, the young wizard left the room and turned towards the elder Granger's door. Eric opened the door after Harry knocked and stood aside to let the boy in. Celia was sitting on the bed, biting her lip. Harry paused when he saw her face and chuckled a bit.

"What could possibly be so funny?" huffed Celia.

Harry chuckled some more, saying, "Sorry, it's just, the look on your face was the look Hermione gets when she's worried about something." He sobered before continuing, "I take it you've known about this?"

Eric answered with a nod, "Hermione told us when we went to pick up Daphne and the girls this summer."

"And you're okay with it?" Harry pressed.

"We are." Celia said, "She's still our daughter and we still love her just as much. It helps that she fell for such a wonderful girl in Daphne."

Harry nodded and headed for the door, "Thank you, that's all I needed to know."

He slowly headed down to the basement, mentally preparing himself for anything. Sitting at the kitchen table were Mrs. Weasley, Ron, and Ginny. But they weren't alone, Kingsley, Remus, Tonks, and Moody were also there. Judging by their faces, though, the four tutors had no idea why Mrs. Weasley and Ron were so angry. Harry turned to his teachers and spoke politely, "Shack, Remus, Tonks, Moody, if you wouldn't mind heading into the training room, the Weasleys and I need to have a private conversation, I'll be there in a minute."

Before they could comply with Harry's request, Mrs. Weasley rounded on him, "Might as well let them stay, they'll know soon enough what those harlots were doing!"

Harry simply said, "Please," as he gestured to the door. The trainers begrudgingly acquiesced, not wanting to miss the potential entertainment. When he was alone with the redheads, he flicked his wand casting a spell to ensure their privacy.

Satisfied that they would not be overheard (not seeing the extendable ear that was passed under the door), the angry wizard turned blazing green eyes on the Weasley matriarch, he spat angrily, "What gives you the right to invade their privacy like that? What gives you the right to judge what they do behind closed doors?"

Molly's face reddened as she was dressed down by someone less than half her age, "I'll not have you talk to me like that, Harry! You should show the proper respect!"

Harry fired back, "I respect those who earn it! Now answer my question!" He was getting so angry that his eyes were glowing brightly and an unseen wind was starting to pull at his hair and clothes.

Mrs. Weasley ignored the questions asked of her and began ranting righteously, "I knew I should have insisted you move to the Burrow. I would never have allowed such impropriety under my roof. What must the Grangers think!"

"The Grangers are perfectly okay with the choices their daughter has made in her life, including who she has fallen in love with!" The magic was beginning to crackle around Harry as he snapped back at the redheaded witch.

Molly dismissed them with a wave of her hand as she said, "They're just Muggles. They don't know how to raise a proper witch. I've been trying to undo the damage living in the muggle world so long has done, but I guess there is no teaching some."

At this, all of the magic swirling around Harry stopped. His face went from furious to blank in a heartbeat. His eyes, though, still glowed as if they were two killing curses ready to be unleashed upon a victim. Ginny, showing true intelligence that her brother did not possess, shrank herself into the corner farthest away from her mother and tried to become as invisible as possible.

Harry spoke in a calm, yet still cold voice, "I see. You think that she should be ripped from her parents because they are muggles and are somehow damaging her? You disgust me."

Like a lemming running towards the cliff edge, Ron decided that this was the moment to speak up, "Don't talk to my mum like that!" He jumped as cold eyes focused on him, peering deeper into his soul than he would have liked.

“Why were you so angry about this, Ron?” inquired Harry with a tilt of his head.

Ron fidgeted in his seat as he answered, “Because it was proof that the Slytherins were corrupting you and Hermione. For all I know, they turned you into a poof!”

Ignoring the intended jab, Harry simply shook his head, “No, that's not enough for you to be as angry as you were. What's the real reason?”

The redheaded boy crumbled under the pressure of the green-eyed stare, “Hermione was supposed to be mine! And that bitch took her from me!”

“Hermione isn't a possession to be taken, Ron! She's a wonderful, strong, independent girl and, I thought, one of your best friends!” Harry paused for a moment, seemingly coming to a conclusion before speaking again. “New rules for this house. No one is allowed above the second floor, unless they currently have a room there, or were invited. I will allow you to use the kitchen whenever you want, but my other guests will be taking all of our meals in the Muggle room. You are not to approach any of us unless asked to by someone else or in an emergency. If you do not want to follow these rules, you will be asked to leave. Now, I have to get to my training. Good day.”

With that, Harry turned, dispelled the privacy wards he had set and strode from the room into his training area, where he spent his time blowing up everything that he possibly could.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

That night, just before dinner, Harry was taking the longest, hottest shower he could tolerate. He had used up most of his anger against the golems and statues his teachers provided. They had respected his wishes and refrained from asking about what the blow-up was about. He finally decided he was calm enough to speak rationally with his other best friend, turned off the water, dried, dressed and made his way to the muggle room. Inside were the people he had grown

quite close to over the summer. Eric and Celia, Hermione, Daphne, Luna, Blaise, and Tracey were all sitting around a table with a single space saved for him at the head.

Harry entered the room silently, nodded his hello and sat down to the delicious looking stuffed chicken breast that Dobby had prepared as their dinner.

Eric tried breaking the ice, "So, how did the talk with Molly go?"

The raven-haired wizard smirked and said, "Oh, I think you know all about how it went. Hermione would have told you everything she heard."

Harry's smirk turned into his trademark sideways grin at Hermione's shocked face, "I saw the extendable ears slip out from under the door as I was leaving. Don't worry, I'm not mad."

Hermione blushed and said meaningfully, "I wanted to thank you, Harry, for defending us like you did, especially having this sprung on you like it was. I also wanted to apologize for keeping it from you for so long, I was trying to work up my courage to tell you."

The young wizard smiled reassuringly and said, "It's okay, Hermione, I understand why you would hide something like that from me. I've hidden stuff about myself from you, too, if you remember. How long have you been together?"

Daphne smiled and answered, "Since around Christmas. From what Hermione told me, about the same time you were kissing Cho Chang for the first time, Hermione was kissing me for the first time."

Harry laughed and said, "Seeing as you're still together, I assume yours went a bit better than mine."

Hermione sat primly and said, "Quite, neither of us were crying."

The group broke down into laughter after that. They shelved more sensitive topics for later and had a lovely dinner together. When Harry pushed away his second empty plate of treacle tart, breaking

his diet for just one night, he sat back and said, "So, Hermione is dating Daphne and Blaise and Tracey are together, where does Luna end up in all this?"

Luna spoke up dreamily, "Oh, I switch rooms every night. Equal time and all that."

Harry's mind was a bit sluggish with food, so he blurted out, "Erm- are you...into blokes or ladies?" He realized what he had just asked, blushed and stammered, "You-ah, you don't have to answer that, it's really none of my business. I'm sorry, I really-"

Luna cut him off, answering with a shrug, "I really don't define myself like that. I'm just attracted to who I'm attracted to."

Blaise cut in, with a grin, "What the little minx isn't telling you, is that no matter how many people are in the room, only one bed is used." She winked at the other blond, causing the younger girl to blush.

All eyes subtly shifted to Harry to gauge his reaction to this latest bombshell. He merely raised his eyes and whistled, "Can you imagine Mount Molly's eruption had she found three of you in bed together, instead of just two?" Relieved laughter filled the room as the last secret was shared and accepted.

Harry looked at Hermione as he spoke again, "We really have been hiding quite a bit from each other, haven't we?" He continued after her nod, "Well, we don't really need to anymore and I'd like to get to know the real you, if you want."

Hermione sniffed back some tears and responded, "Oh, Harry. You've always known the real me, it's just that I've held back some of my traits."

"Like what?" Harry asked.

"I'm a very tactile person," at Harry's questioning look, Hermione continued, "I like to make physical contact with the people I'm around. Much more than the way I am in public at Hogwarts."

“Oh, okay,” Harry responded with a shrug. He cast his eyes around the room and took in the other people. “How about we all just relax and be ourselves from now on. No more hiding things, you’ve all become my best friends over this summer, and you aren’t going to lose that.” He was touched by the beaming smiles and exuberant nods.

The young wizard yawned and stood to make his way to the door, “I know it’s still early, but it’s been a long day and I’m knackered.” He paused at the door and turned back, “Oh! I set up some new rules for the house. No one, other than those of us who have rooms up here, is allowed on the third floor without permission. Dobby has added security to his job list. We’re gonna take all of our meals in here from now on, and Molly and Ron can not approach any of you, unless it’s an emergency. Ginny didn’t say anything during the argument, so I don’t know what she’s thinking. Goodnight, everyone.”

And with that, the emotionally and physically spent wizard traipsed back to his room and collapsed onto his bed, asleep before his head hit the pillow.

Chapter 9:

Hermione woke the morning of their trip to Diagon Alley a very content woman. She was sandwiched between two of the people she loved most in the world, Luna and Daphne. The brunette witch didn't move to get up yet, as it was apparent that her bedmates were not yet awake. She took the time to think over the events of the past two months.

The way her life had taken twists and turns was enough to leave her head spinning, if it weren't for the fact that the previous five years had prepared her for bombshells of information being rained down upon her. No, being the best friend of Harry Potter has certainly taught her how to deal with surprise.

The addition of Luna to her relationship was, while abrupt and startling, surprisingly easy and felt natural. As she thought about blond laying in front of her, with her head tucked under Hermione's chin, the brunette began unconsciously drawing small patterns on the small of Luna's back.

What pleased Hermione the most, though, was how Harry had reacted to the latest bit of intrigue into his life. Not only did her best friend accept her less-than-normal lifestyle, he defended her to the woman whom he had seen as a mother figure. He was and would always be, the best friend she had ever had. The fact that Harry hadn't acted any differently around her or the other girls yesterday was all the proof that she needed that she still had her best friend by her side.

The thoughtful witch was broken out of her musings by the feel of soft lips kissing her shoulder and a hand reaching from her side to stroke her stomach.

"Good morning, love," Daphne breathed quietly into Hermione's ear.

Hermione shuddered when she felt the redhead's warm breath caress her ear and moaned in pleasure as the skillful hand of her lover brushed over her breasts.

“Very good morning, indeed.” Agreed Hermione.

“You seemed to be thinking pretty hard about something, what was it?” Daphne inquired, as her fingers danced over Hermione's stomach and dipped between the brunette's legs, which obediently separated for her.

Hermione moaned as Daphne's dipped into her, “I was think-ah-thinking, oh, about...god that's good, about stuff.”

A fully awake Luna giggle from in front of Hermione. She popped herself onto her elbow to look over Hermione's shoulder into the smouldering, but amused, purple eyes of Daphne, the younger girl asked, “You just love making the smartest witch of the age lose her train of thought, don't you?” The sensual smirk that formed over the redhead's mouth was all the answer that Luna needed as she scooted down the bed and sucked one of Hermione's nipples into her mouth.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Harry was walking back up to his room to shower, change, and eat breakfast before the trip to Daigon Alley that day. He stopped when the door to Hermione's room popped open and said girl all-but floated out of the room in a bath robe. She had the goofiest grin Harry had ever seen on her face and her eyes were slightly glazed. His suspicions were confirmed when Daphne strolled out of the room with a self satisfied smirk on her face, followed by Luna who looked completely normal.

“Looking forward to Diagon Alley, Harry?” Luna queried.

“Erm-Uh, yeah, yeah Diagon Alley, good.” Stammered Harry, still flustered by the sight of three attractive witches in naught but a bath robe.

“Shouldn't you be getting ready, Harry? We'll be leaving in an hour or so.” Suggested the blonde who was struggling valiantly to hold in her giggles.

"Hm?" Asked Harry, before he snapped himself out of his daze and blushed furiously. "Oh, I'm sorry Luna, yes. I should go get ready. If you wanted to wait a few minutes, you could use my shower."

"That would be lovely, thank you, Harry." stated Luna as she followed him into his room. Harry gathered a fresh change of clothes and disappeared into the bathroom for a quick shower.

Once everyone had showered, dressed and eaten, they gathered in the kitchen where the Weasleys and several Order members were waiting. Molly and Ron were silently fuming at the far end of the table with Arthur standing behind them. Harry couldn't decide if Arthur's hand on Molly's shoulder was in support or to keep her calm, perhaps both.

Ginny stood with Bill and Fleur to the right of Arthur, she had the thoughtful expression on her face that she had been carrying since the argument. Tonks was sitting next to Remus, the metamorph had bubblegum pink hair today, but her face was all business. Remus looked to be a little more run-down than usual seeing as he was only three days from the full moon. Moody was standing in the corner, his eye spinning about, taking everyone in as they entered the room.

"No Shack today?" Asked Harry.

Tonks replied, "Nah, he's got a shift with the Aurors today."

Moody cut off the conversation as he began to lay out his plan of attack. "Alright, we're going to floo to the Leaky Cauldron. Tonks and Remus first, then Arthur. Then Ron and Ginny, then Greengrass and Lovegood, then Molly, then Davis and Zabini, then Delacour and Mr. Granger, then Bill and Mrs. Granger, then Potter and Miss Granger I'll bring up the rear. Once we get there, we stay in a large group."

Harry interrupted before the aged Auror could continue, "No, a big group isn't a good idea. If we're all packed into an already crowded shop, we would be sitting ducks for any attacker. No, we spilt up into groups. The Weasleys in a group together, then Blaise, Tracey and Daphne with Bill and Fleur. The Grangers and Luna with Tonks and Moody, and Moony and I should be fine together. We can converge

on Gringotts as a group, but split off separately from there, meeting back at the Cauldron around, say, Dinner time. That should give everyone time to hit all the shops in a rotation, and people can get lunch at their leisure.”

Moody stared at Harry appraisingly, then started nodding. “Good thinking. We'll do that. Let's go.”

The Leaky Cauldron was mostly empty except for their group as Harry tumbled out of the fireplace. The fear of the Dark Lord driving most wizards and witches away. Tom the toothless bartender was standing idly behind his bar, watching as the large group of people entered his establishment.

Moody stepped out of the floo as Harry stood and brushed himself off. The grizzled old Master Auror looked to Tom and asked, “What's the Alley like today?”

Tom answered wearily, “Lot's of people come through today to get in, no one has time to stop for somethin' to eat, though.”

“Well, you'll have a pretty big group for supper.” Said a smiling Harry. Tom smiled back in response.

“Let's get moving, Gringotts first. Keep your eyes open.” Ordered Moody.

The trip through the Goblin bank was uneventful, if long. Harry received a statement with all of his holdings, including his full inheritance from his parents. He put that away to look at later; they were on a schedule. As he returned from his trip to the vault, he saw the Weasleys already heading out the door, Molly's voice carrying back to him, “Madam Malkin's first, we'll stop at Fred and George's shop at the end.”

Remus fell in step beside Harry as he exited from the bank, “What all do you need to get?”

Harry pulled out the list he had made, “Let's see, books, refill of my potions supplies, I'd like a new school bag, new robes...maybe we

could catch up with some of the girls to help us out, there. I'd like to see Fred and George's shop, too. I'll need more parchment and quills, too. Oh, and I'll need to stop at Eyelop's for some owl treats for Hedwig. Let's go there, first."

Remus simply said, "Lead on."

Harry and Remus went efficiently from shop to shop picking up Harry's supplies. When he was buying his new bag, he saw that there was an option to have it made bottomless with a featherlight charm put on it. He decided to get six of them, one for each of the girls. Harry had been chatting happily with Lupin during their shopping spree. The werewolf had Harry smiling wistfully during their lunch, telling stories of the Marauder's exploits.

As they wandered past the boarded up building that was Ollivander's shop, Harry wondered aloud, "Ollivander was taken pretty early in the summer, how will this year's first years get their wands?"

Remus answered, "Professor Dumbledore has a foreign wandmaker coming to Hogwarts on the first day of classes. He'll make the announcement that anyone who needs a wand is excused from their morning classes."

Harry nodded, "Good thinking. Flourish and Blotts next? Maybe Hermione will be there."

"Hermione? In a book store? You're daft man!" Replied Remus. "Let's go."

The two chuckling wizards lazily made their way to the book store.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Daphne was having a great day so far. She was spending the day doing her school shopping with her Slytherin girls. While she would have loved to spend the day with Hermione, she was just as glad to have this time with her first friends. They were talking and joking with each other as if they didn't have a care in the world. If it weren't for the setting during lunch, they could have been sitting at the Slytherin

table in the Great Hall of Hogwarts. This was a front, though, just like their 'Untouchables' personas. The girls felt, just like everyone else scurrying around the shops and stores, the palpable tension and sense of all-encompassing fear in the air.

The group, led by Bill and Fleur, moved quickly from shop to shop, occasionally running into the other groups. They avoided the Weasleys as much as possible, only seeing the redheaded clan from a distance. When they came across the Granger group, Tracey 'accidentally' ran right into Hermione, grabbing a discrete handful of the brunette's bottom.

"Tracey!" Hermione squeaked.

"What?" Replied Tracey with an innocent look plastered on her face.

Hermione huffed and said, "What is it with you and my bum?"

The black haired Slytherin just smiled enticingly and walked away. Blaise laughed, winked and followed her lover. As Daphne passed by she leaned into the bushy-haired blushing girl and whispered, "We can't help that you have the sexiest arse on earth. See you later, love." Their fingers brushed together, as they passed, for that little bit of contact and reassurance.

Hermione blushed, shook her head, and started walking with her parents and Luna thinking, "I'll pay them back later." A sexy smirk grew on her face as she thought of the 'punishments' she would dole out.

Blaise had caught up to Tracey and said, "You know she's going to pay us back for that, right?"

The bum-pinching Slytherin licked her lips and said in a sultry voice, "Can't wait. Hermione always comes up with the best punishments."

Daphne strode up beside her two friends and said, "Quit perving on my girlfriend...at least until we can get home and she can perv on you, too."

The trio laughed as they made their way into Flourish and Blotts. The bookstore was fairly crowded, but didn't carry the din that it should have. People were scurrying about from shelf to shelf as if they were cockroaches and a light had just been flicked on.

Daphne turned to her two compatriots and said, "You two search for the books for the core classes, I'll search for the electives and any extras we might want."

Tracey and Blaise nodded and swept off towards the largest group of people, knowing that Daphne would take a bit of time. She was almost as interested in obscure books as Hermione. The redhead picked up the books for Astronomy, Arithmancy, and Ancient Runes and then moved onto books on enchanted weapons and pureblood marriage laws. All of the girls wanted to find anything that would aid Harry in his fight against the Dark Lord, including weapons.

Daphne wanted to give Harry more details about the information she gave him during their "pureblood lessons" from earlier in the summer. The boy had spoken to the Headmaster over the floo and they were right, Harry's fan mail was being diverted into a storage room at Hogwarts. The young celebrity had requested that Dobby sort through the mountain of mail starting Sunday, once he had made sure the elf could check for any traps, or curses. He didn't want his elf-friend to get hurt.

Daphne was flipping through a book about enchanting objects when the hair on the back of her neck stood up. She could feel the eyes of someone on her and it made her uneasy. Violet eyes began scanning the room, looking to find whoever was staring. Turning slowly in a circle, trying to remain calm and seemingly oblivious, she eventually saw who was watching her.

The grey eyes staring at her hungrily almost made her void her stomach on the spot. The blonde haired wizard saw that she had noticed him and was about to step towards her, when his path was blocked by a man with wild raven hair. Relief flooded through Daphne when she saw that Harry had intercepted the blonde ponce. She knew, without doubt, that with Harry around she would never be safer.

The two wizards were exchanging words and Daphne could tell that Harry was not winning this verbal sparring match. The way Malfoy's mouth formed into a condescending smirk and the victory that shown in his grey eyes sent chills down the girl's spine. She could also see Harry's shoulders tense and his hands ball into fists so tight that his knuckles turned white. Just when it looked like Harry would strike, the conversation was interrupted by the prim and proper looking Narcissa Malfoy. She had appeared, said something while looking down her nose at Harry, then turned and left.

When the younger Malfoy turned and left with his mother, Harry's shoulders slumped. He ran both of his hands through his hair in frustration and took a deep breath to try and calm himself. Daphne added the book she was holding to the pile of books she was buying, left them on the floor and went to Harry. Putting a tentative hand on his shoulder, which she removed quickly when he tensed, she spoke quietly, "Are you alright Harry?"

She was startled by the flash of fear in Harry's eyes as he looked at her before it was gone and he grinned at her, "Yeah, I'm fine. Normal ferret sighting. Nothing to worry about. How is your shopping going? I'm surprised not to find Hermione in here."

Daphne wanted to question Harry about what she saw in his eyes, but allowed him to divert the question, "The shopping is going well, almost finished, actually. We just need to go to Madam Malkin's after this, then we're finished." The redhead then grinned, showing a twinkle of amusement in her violet eyes, "You should know that Hermione came here straight away. Nothing can keep that girl from her books."

Harry laughed, "Of course I knew she came straight away, I'm still surprised I didn't find her here. She could spend a whole day in a bookstore if we let her, although I can think of something that is able to pull her away from her books." He winked at Daphne, causing her to blush and smile back before he continued, "I need to go to Madam Malkin's, too. Maybe you and the girls can help me pick out some new robes, since I have zero fashion sense."

The Slytherin nodded and said, "Sure, let's go find the others and we'll head over there." Before she could pick up her pile of books, Harry had bent down and added her stack to his and started toward the cashier. "I could have gotten those, you know."

"I know," replied Harry, "I'm just helping out. There's Blaise and Tracey, looks like they already paid."

Harry paid for all the purchases and the group was walking out the door as the Weasley clan was walking in. The green-eyed wizard tried to smile at the family of redheads, but they mostly ignored him. Except for Arthur, who gave him a small, sad smile in return, and Ginny who nodded her greeting. Harry's shoulders slumped at the coldness he felt from his former best friend. Yes, the other boy had said some hurtful things to him and about his friends, but five years of friendship was still hard for Harry to just give up on. Harry shook himself from his melancholy and followed his newer friends towards the robe shop.

Harry opened the door and allowed Tracey, Daphne, Blaise, and Fleur to proceed in before him. Remus and Bill, not wanting to be trapped by the shopping females, opted to "guard the entrance." The younger wizard just rolled his eyes and entered the shop. He expected the shop to be just as packed as the rest, but it was almost empty. There was just a single man and woman being tended to.

Tracey gasped as she saw who the couple was. The man heard the reaction and turned to look at the group of people who just entered. When his eyes fell on Tracey, though, they became cold and angry. "What are you doing here, girl?" The man snarled.

Harry, unaware of who the man was, stepped forward and said, "We're just doing our school shopping, sir. Just like every other Hogwarts student."

The man turned blazing brown eyes back on the visibly frightened blonde Slytherin, "And with what money are you buying these school supplies?"

Tracey replied in a quiet voice, avoiding the eyes of the enraged man in front of her, "My vault, sir."

The man sneered, "You mean the vault full of my money that I gave to my daughter?"

Tracey just nodded shakily.

The man roared, "That vault is no longer yours! I have no daughter! I, Bryce Howard Davis, Head of House Davis cast Tracey Marie Davis out of House Davis." When he finished a white ball of light streaked from Tracey to Bryce, causing Tracey to gasp and grab her chest as she sank down to her knees.

The devastated girl turned watery, pain filled eyes to the blonde woman standing next to her former father, "Mum...Please."

The woman just sneered, "I have no daughter. Come, Bryce, I no longer wish to shop here, knowing what filth they serve."

The man nodded and led his wife out of the shop. As soon as the door closed Tracey broke down into tears and Blaise, Daphne, and Fleur all crowded around her to give her support. Harry stood awkwardly to the side, unsure of what he could do to help his friend.

It took a few minutes for the nameless girl to collect herself, but with the help of her friends, she was able to stop crying and stand back up again. Tracey then realized that she was completely cut off from all of her resources. She bit her lip and looked around, "Oh Merlin, he took away my vault, I'll never be able to pay for anything..."

Harry cut her off, speaking earnestly, "You know you'll never have to worry about that, Tracey, I'll take care of anything you might need. All you have to do is ask."

Tears filled Tracey's eyes, but did not spill over, as she walked over to Harry and pulled him into a hug, "Thank you, Harry. You are a true friend."

Harry tensed at first contact, as he always did, but momentarily he submitted to the embrace. Wanting to break the awkward moment, Harry pulled back and spoke, "Now, how about you help me find a new wardrobe? I am completely at your mercy." The eager look in the girl's eyes, which was mirrored in the eyes of the other three girls made him regret that statement. "Erm..."

Tracey grabbed his hand and yanked him towards the waiting Madam Malkin and her measuring tape. What followed was two hours of the girls throwing robes of various size, color, and design at Harry for him to try on. He wasn't paying too much attention, though. He knew from his new Muggle clothes that the girls had good taste and the events of the day were troubling him. He couldn't get the confrontation with Malfoy out of his head. He closed his eyes to review it once more.

Harry had been in the bookstore collecting his books for the classes he had decided to take the next year. He was heading to the section with the more obscure books, thinking that there might be something he hadn't seen already that would help him in his fight. When he got to that section, he immediately saw Malfoy and his hackles raised. The blonde ponce appeared to be staring at something rather intently,

When he followed the grey eyed stare, his green eyes fell on Daphne who was looking back at Malfoy with fear and disgust in her eyes. Harry stepped in front of the other boy to prevent him from going after Daphne.

"What you are doing?" Harry asked.

"I'm going to let that tart know she's mine, now out of my way Potty." Replied Draco, completely sure of himself.

"You know that I'll never let you near her." The tension in Harry's shoulders and the rage boiling his blood was increasing quickly as the conversation continued.

"So, it is true, you're the big bad Gryffindor protector. What makes you think you can protect them any better than you did your vaunted godfather?" Victory shown in the blonde's eyes at the pain he caused

in the other boy. "You can't, Potty. I'm going to have my fun with each of those three slags this year."

Harry spoke through gritted teeth. "You'll not lay a finger on them. Ever!"

Malfoy just smirked and said, "You can't protect them all the time. What will you do when they're tucked away out of your reach in our common room? Oh no. They'll be mine."

A shiver went down Harry's spine at the lecherous glint to Draco's grey eyes. He was about to respond when Narcissa Malfoy approached the pair, speaking to her son while staring imperiously at Harry. "Come along, Draco, you know I don't like you sullyng yourself by interacting with the riff-raff. We'll get your supplies elsewhere, this place has truly gone to the dogs."

Harry glared at the blonde woman when she emphasized the word dog, but said nothing as they turned and left. He couldn't keep the fear from his eyes when Daphne touched his shoulder, but he was able to hide it quickly.

Harry knew that Malfoy had been right. There was no way he could protect them down in the Slytherin dorms. Now that Tracey had been kicked out of her house, she had even less right to protect herself in the eyes of the purebloods. A cold weight settled on his heart as he thought about what would happen to them if he couldn't keep them safe this year.

Fleur pulled him out of his musings by grabbing his arm just above his left elbow, "Come along, 'Arry eet ees time to pay and go. We are finished 'ere. Ees zere anywhere else you would like to go?"

The boy shook his head to clear his depressing thoughts and looked at the blonde veela, "Erm...yeah, uh. Yeah, I'd like to see the Weasley twins' shop before dinner, if we have time. Would you ladies like to come with me, or are you done?"

After sharing a glance, the girls decided that they would all go to the last shop together quickly since it was close to their meeting time.

The group approached the shop and all were amazed. It was a brightly colored building with flashing, animated signs in the windows. Truly an attention-getter.

Remus looked on, amused, "Well, no one will ever say they missed this place. Let's go in."

The group entered and were even more awed; it was packed. People were shoulder to shoulder looking through the shelves of pranks. Harry waved at the twins when he saw them, they were surrounded by customers buying their products. The younger wizard decided to look around a bit before talking to them.

He walked through the rows and rows of products, thinking that each and every one of them would be on Filch's banned items list. He saw skiving snackboxes, fanged frisbees, and small balls of fur that seemed to roll about in cages. He was curious about what a gaggle of girls were gathered around. Harry made his way to find out what they were giggling about. The 'Chosen One' froze in shock and dread when he caught sight of the product on the table. Love Potions. The twins were selling love potions.

Harry groaned when one of the girls turned, saw him, then quickly picked up one of the boxes and headed to the cashiers. Fighting a blush, the teenage wizard marched up to the front, grabbed one of the redheaded twins (he didn't care which) and pulled him to what he saw was a back room.

"What the bloody hell are you doing selling love potions?" Harry snapped.

George saw the anger in Harry's eyes and tried his best to calm him down, "We're not selling amortentia or anything like that, Harry. The ones we're selling are pretty light. They only last an hour and won't get someone to do anything that they are unlikely to do in the first place."

The irate younger wizard calmed for a minute before saying, "Fine, but you're supplying me an antidote weekly. I don't have time to be

fawning over every bloody witch at Hogwarts and I don't want to end up paranoid like Moody.”

George scratched the back of his head, “Erm, whoops. Didn't think about that. Sorry, Harry.”

Harry rolled his eyes and said, “Other than that, the place looks fantastic. You really seem to be raking in the business. Are you still doing owl orders?”

“Yeah, it'll be a staple once you kiddies head back to school. Hopefully you won't have anyone from the Ministry searching through owls this year.” Replied George.

Harry excused himself after he and the twin spoken a few minutes longer, seeing that it was time to meet up for dinner with the rest of the group. He gathered his friends and chaperones and waved at the twins on their way out.

During dinner, surrounded by the chatter of his friends, Harry sank back into his worried state of mind. He was agonizing over the fact that he might not be able to keep his friends safe. Malfoy's mention of his godfather cut deeper than he would like to admit. He was suddenly doubting whether or not he could actually protect anybody.

Even after the group had returned to Grimmauld, Harry remained in his funk. The girls were very confused when their friend's emerald eyes lit up and he grabbed the marital law book that Daphne had picked up and asked to borrow a copy of Hermione's *Hogwarts: A History*. Harry then disappeared into his bedroom for the rest of the evening to pore over the two books, trying to find some answers.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Arthur Weasley was a man that enjoyed his sleep. It was a time that he could forget the day's events and his troubles, curl up to the soft, warm form of his beloved wife and relax. Tonight was different, though. Tonight, Arthur couldn't help but recall the events of the day, particularly seeing his wife and youngest son all but glaring daggers at young Harry. Something had happened, but dear Molly wouldn't

talk about what. She seemed full of righteous anger, but it was easy to get his wife full of righteous anger.

The unsettling feeling of discord that had filled the house in the past couple of days was keeping the redheaded patriarch awake tonight. He decided that a warm cup of tea might help to settle himself down. It was rather late at night, so he was surprised to find the kitchen occupied.

Harry was sitting at the table, clutching his own steaming cup of tea, seemingly deep in thought. The young man looked up when the door swung open. The two men stared at each other for a moment, before the younger looked back down at his drink.

"Couldn't sleep, Harry?" Arthur asked. He continued when the boy gave a shake of his head, "Me either. Something in the air."

Harry nodded and muttered a quiet, "Yeah, something."

The two wizards sat quietly at the table, each lost in their own thoughts. The older man watched the younger as they sipped their tea, watched the hunch of his shoulders, the way his head was dipped, the weariness he saw in those famous green eyes. Arthur's paternal instinct was kicking in, wanting to try to take some of the great burden that rested on those young shoulders. So, finally, after a long silence, Arthur spoke.

"Harry, what happened between you and Molly and Ron?" He asked.

Harry stiffened, then heaved out a large sigh before looking up at the man that seemed to care for him like a father would, "We all had an argument over the differences in our beliefs. It was really a continuation of our argument about whether or not all Slytherins are evil."

Arthur winced when he remembered the fight that had occurred in his house. "Yes, I can see where that might cause some animosity."

Startled green eyes looked up at Arthur, "You mean you don't hate me as well?"

The father of seven smiled reassuringly and said, "No, Harry, I don't hate you. I don't think they hate you either. I still don't completely understand what has happened, yet, but it can't have been enough to make Molly or Ron hate you."

Harry chuckled mirthlessly, "You could have fooled me with the way those two have been alternately glaring and ignoring me." At Arthur's wince, he continued, "It's alright. It can't be helped right now. Maybe sometime in the future when things aren't so wild and troubled. When the event itself isn't so fresh."

"What exactly happened, Harry?"

"I'm not sure I want to tell you, sir. First it's not my place to say, and second, I'm not sure I can handle another Weasley treating me like a pariah." Harry took a few moments to think before he said, "It's also not fair to make Mrs. Weasley keep this from you as well." He took a deep breath and said in a steady voice, "Mrs. Weasley and Ron walked in on Hermione and Daphne in bed together. She began screaming at them that it was unnatural. I would not, and will not, stand for that, so I took them downstairs and told them in no uncertain terms to leave us alone."

"...Ah." Arthur said after a moment of shock, "I can see why Molly would react the way she did."

Harry cut him off in a stern voice, "They did nothing wrong, sir. Nothing unnatural about it. They're in love, I can't think of anything more natural than that."

The redhead was holding his hands up to help calm the suddenly angry boy in front of him, "I never said I thought it was wrong, Harry. In fact, I agree with you. But Molly, she grew up with the old-world beliefs and they are a difficult thing to change. It's only through my constant pestering that she even began to think about muggles."

"But that's what we're fighting isn't it? The old-world beliefs that things should be one way and anything else is 'unnatural.' I lived in a house with that mindset for ten years. I was a part of the anything else. It's

not a belief that a society should build itself around.” Harry sighed, then continued, “I promised to protect them, Mr. Weasley. They thought it was just from Death Eaters and physical danger. No, I have given my promise to protect them from everything I can. Old-world beliefs included. I won't let them down.”

The two stared into each other's eyes for a long moment, both men trying to judge the other. Arthur broke first, speaking as he stood to go back to bed, “You're parents would be proud of you, Harry. Don't let anyone knock you from your path and maybe you can drag the world forward with you. Goodnight, Harry.”

A thoughtful Harry waved his goodnight and continued to sit and think over the day's events.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

The next day proceeded much like the other Sundays had during their stay at Grimmauld Place. It was filled with training, and studying and some relaxing. The girls had noticed that Harry's mood had not improved much from the previous day. There was a thoughtful air about him that did not allow the wizard to focus fully on whatever he was doing at the moment. The day passed quickly, everyone scurrying about their tasks, an unknown restlessness that was always present in the air pushing them along.

Dinner was a quiet affair. Harry's nervousness visibly increased as they ate. He was fidgeting and playing with his food, never making eye contact with anyone for more than a moment. Hermione was absolutely intrigued because her best friend only ever acted like this when he had an idea that he thought others might not like. So, she waited patiently when the dishes disappeared, and she was rewarded when Harry scratched the back of his neck and cleared his throat.

“I'd like to talk to you all about something. It's something that's been bothering me for a while, but only came to a head yesterday.”

“We've noticed that you've been off. Ever since you ran into Malfoy at Flourish and Blotts.” Replied Daphne, “What did he say that's got you in such a funk?”

Harry swallowed hard and said, "It's the problem of how to protect you once we all get back to school. Malfoy told me, and he's right, that I can't keep you safe while you're in the Slytherin dorms. We all know that the ferret can do anything he wants down there. So, I spent most of last night going through Hermione's Hogwarts: A History, looking for some legal way to move the three of you out of your dorms."

Hermione interrupted thoughtfully, "But why would that have you so nerv...Oh. Oh my. That is certainly an option, a bit extreme, but an option."

Eric broke into his daughter's ramblings asking, "What, exactly, would this extreme option be?"

The two best friends locked eyes, communicating the way that only they could, Harry giving his assent that Hermione could break the news to the group. "He is suggesting that he take Blaise, Tracey, and Daphne on as his consorts."

Harry spoke next, his face pale from his nerves, "You and Luna, too. Wouldn't want to break up the team."

The two statements together were answered by dropped jaws and shocked faces from everyone in the room, bar the sixteen year old wizard.

The group stared at Harry, tearing at his already ragged self-confidence until he looked down at the table and said in a quiet voice, "It-it was only an idea. I-erm, we don't have to do it. I just, you know, thought it would solve several problems at once."

Celia broke out of her shock first. "What do you mean Harry? What would being a consort entail and how would it solve any problems?"

Luna spoke up next, her voice soft, but strong, "There is not much difference between being a consort and a wife. A wife may have a few more privileges, but there can only be one wife, there can be

many consorts. It's a left over law from a society built around rich and powerful men, who liked to show off their riches and their power."

Eric spoke next, trying to understand what this young man was proposing, but still trusting that it would be for the best. "So, how does gaining yourself five wives solve anything?"

Harry answered the all-important question with a bit of nervousness still in his eyes, "Well, according to Hogwarts: A History," he smirked at Hermione, who stuck out her tongue, "the Head of a House who has a wife or consorts, or mistresses, or concubines, has the right to request a set of rooms separate from the rest of the dormitory of whatever house he belongs to."

"This gets us out of Malfoy's clutches." Interjected Blaise.

"Right," answered Harry, "the next benefit is that this lot can continue their relationship in peace. If they are...um, let's say aligned...with me, then no one will question them spending their time together. They can also have a bit of a sanctuary to be as openly affectionate as they want."

This statement warmed the heart of the witches. That he would go to such lengths to ensure that they would have a place to be happy together meant more to each of them than they could say. The beaming smiles on their faces was enough for Harry, though. He blushed slightly and ducked his head as he continued.

"It also provides a bit of career help for them as well. Daphne explained to me while they were with me at Privet Drive that this is a male-dominated world and they would need to be...we'll go with aligned, again...to a politically powerful male to get any kind of decent job in the ministry. They'll be aligned with two of the most powerful houses in Great Britain, the Blacks and the Potters. There won't be many doors closed to them after that."

Tracey added her opinion, "This would help Hermione and I the most, since neither of us really has any kind of wizarding house name to fall back on by ourselves. It opens doors that would remain forever locked."

"It also gives them financial security, since I would open my vaults to them with unrestricted access." Finished Harry.

Eric's eyebrows raised at the trust he was willing to show these girls. "Okay, that's all well and good, but what are the cons? Privileges like that don't come along without some consequences."

Harry blushed, fully this time, and ducked his head once more. "The laws that cover consorts in the books that I found state that, if I die, each consort has to have produced a child with my blood for them to retain their rights to the Potter and Black family name and assets before they turn twenty five. It's the main sticking point in this plan that I can't find an answer for, since I refuse to make anyone have my children. That and it would be particularly difficult since none of you ladies really see me like that."

Celia answered this thought, though, "That wouldn't really be a problem, though. At least, not to muggles." She continued at Harry's questioning glance, "They have this procedure called In Vitro fertilization. They can take your sperm, freeze it, then at a later date, use it to fertilize an egg. It's a relatively simple procedure." She finished with a shrug.

Harry just sat with his mouth open, surprised even more by Daphne's voice breaking into the conversation, "How easy would it be to set something like this up? I mean, if Harry is agreeable that is. Even if we didn't do the whole consort thing, I can't imagine another man being the father of my children." The four other girls nodded along with the redhead.

"Habba, whu...but..." Harry stammered at this revelation.

Blaise laughed and closed the stunned young man's gaping mouth, "Relax, Harry. None of us wants to get pregnant now, but you know, in the future. Sure."

Celia answered Daphne's question, "It would be fairly easy. I would just need to take Harry to a clinic here in London."

“How do you know so much about this?” Asked Harry.

Eric answered, though, “Well, Celia had some complications when Hermione was born. She was unable to get pregnant again the usual way. When this technology was developed, we started looking into it. Unfortunately, it was just too dangerous for Celia to try and give birth again. But, we researched everything as thoroughly as we could. It should be fairly easy to do with Harry's assets. We'd just need to make an appointment.”

“Let's put that on the back-burner for a moment, though.” interrupted Mother Granger before the conversation got too sidetracked. “I still have some questions about this consort thing.” Harry gestured for Celia to continue, “What about you, Harry?”

“What about me? I'll continue on as I have been. Learning and training as much as possible until I finally have to face Voldemort.” Harry was pleased that no one really flinched at the name of the dark lord. He had been sneaking the name randomly into conversation to break them of that habit.

Harry continued after a moment, “It does have a benefit for me, though. It gives me a perfectly legal reason to turn down any marriage contracts I have received.”

Eric stepped in at this point, “I think what Celia is trying to say, is that having five consorts will make it fairly difficult for you to find a girlfriend of your own. Not many women will want to approach someone who already has five others.”

Harry replied, “Oh, that. It doesn't really matter. I'm not looking for a girlfriend or anything like that. I have to focus on the fight. Everything else is secondary.”

There was a long pause in the conversation as the group digested what had been said so far that evening. Celia was worrying that Harry was cutting himself off from human contact and was trying to think of a way to help him. She decided to think about that later. So, she asked the next logical question, “So, how do you go about gaining a consort?”

Harry looked at the faces of his five closest friends and realized that they had all decided that they wanted to do this. "It's fairly simple, really. We all just have to sign, in blood, a magical contract that I wrote up last night, then send a copy to the Ministry and the original to the goblins. You only have to be sixteen to be of legal age to agree to be a consort and a Head of House can legally accept consorts at fourteen, so we're fine as far as age goes."

"Could we read over the contract before we sign?" Hermione asked.

"Of course, let me go grab it. I'll leave it with you tonight, so that you can really look through it. I don't want there to be any loopholes or mistakes that can come back and bite us later." Harry replied as he stood and left the room to get the copy of the contract he wrote. He delivered it back to the ladies and said his goodnights. He was exhausted because he hadn't slept at all the night before. He was still troubled as he fell asleep that night, knowing that he would still have to deal with Dumbledore's objections.

Chapter 10:

A large man in a black cloak lumbered down the stairs of an old manor house towards the basement, a set of keys jingled in his hands as he walked. The man was making his way into the lowest level of the house, a basement two floors below ground level. Hidden here were the dungeons, cement walls stained with blood and chains hanging from them. Tables were filled with gleaming, vicious looking metal objects, and cages lined half the walls of the room with more bloodstains painting the floor red.

There were close to fifteen cages in total in the massive room. All of the cages but one were filled with people in various states of pain and hopelessness. Most were filled with muggle women to be used for the entertainment of the Death Eaters that occupied the house. One cage had a single occupant. An old man sat, staring into nothingness. His clothes were tattered in dirty. His face caked in mud and dried blood. While his wizened eyes still sparkled with intelligence, all hope had been drained out of them. He remained in surprisingly good health, though. That was more because of his usefulness than any form of mercy.

The large man stumped his way to the old man's cage and spoke in a deep, dumb voice, "Master wants ta see ya. Get up."

The old man's shoulders slumped a bit more in resignation as he nodded and rose from his seat on the floor, knowing that his usefulness might be coming to an end. The large Death Eater unlocked the door to the cage and said, "Get moving. Don't want to keep our Lord waiting."

As quickly as possible, the two wound their way through the manor house, climbing stairs and traversing hallways. The two stopped in front of a large, ornate door, and the Death Eater seemed to be mentally preparing himself to be in front of his Master. The old man did the same.

Tightening his grasp on the old man's bicep, the large Death Eater pushed through the door into the throne room of Lord Voldemort, pulling the old man along harshly.

The Dark Lord's red eyes stared malevolently at the two as they approached. He sat perfectly still upon the large throne in the middle of the room, waiting for his minion to present the prisoner to him.

The large man stopped in front of the throne and kneeled, saying, "The wandmaker, My Lord, as you requested."

Pleased red eyes looked upon the prostrate form of his slave before he spoke, "Rise, Goyle."

Goyle stood and said quickly, "Thank you, My Lord, is there any other way I can serve you?"

Voldemort waved his hand and ordered, "Leave us, and make sure we are not disturbed. I will tell you when to take our guest back to his quarters." Goyle bowed deeply, turned on his heel and marched back out of the room, taking up a post outside the doors.

Evil red eyes shifted their attention back to the ancient man, studying him, intimidating him.

Finally, after a long, uncomfortable moment, the Dark Lord spoke, "Well, Ollivander, I believe it is time you and I had a long, overdue discussion. I have quite a few questions to ask of you. Pray you have the answer, for if not, I will be most displeased."

Ollivander simply raised his left eyebrow, waiting for the first question, making no sound.

"Straight to the point; very well. Tell me why my wand locked with Potter's last year. Why was he able to overpower it?" asked the snake faced, man.

The wandmaker's right eyebrow joined his left near his hairline. "Curious, very curious. It seems that the cores of the brother wands connected."

He was cut off as the dark wizard pulled his wand from his sleeve and inspected it, Ollivander's eyes also locking onto the stick. "Brother wands? Explain." He said, snapping his attention back to the old man.

"Each of your wands have a phoenix feather core from the same phoenix, Fawkes." Ollivander said. His interest in the deeper workings in wands cutting through his fear and any ideas of keeping secrets.

"Dumbledore's bird? Hm. Very well, but that does not explain how I was overpowered. Potter is a school boy and I am the greatest wizard in the world."

The old man's blue eyes stayed riveted to the wand as he spoke clearly, "That wand is no longer suited to you. Frankly, I'm amazed that it works for you at all. With whatever changes you endured through reacquiring your body, this wand is useless to you. You'll need a new one, though I doubt any other currently made wand would suit you, either. No, it will have to be a very particularly made wand."

Voldemort's lips curled up into a cruel smile, "I'm so glad you think so, seeing as you'll be making this wand for me."

Ollivander's eyes finally snapped from the wand and connected with the snake-like eyes in front of him. A war of thoughts plagued the old man. "This would truly be a unique wand. Like none other in history."

"But it would be used for such evil. Murder, destruction, chaos. Nothing would stand in its way."

"It would be my greatest achievement. A true work of art. It would be admired and feared for all time."

With that last thought, the old man's decision was made. He nodded his head before speaking, "All of the components will have to be collected by you, personally. The core will need to be from a truly dark and powerful creature. No mere dragon heartstring or unicorn hair would work. No, perhaps a heartstring from a Nundu or a hair from the mane of a chimera. You will also need to find the material for

the casing, you will know what it is when you find it. Again, it is something you will need to do yourself.”

Voldemort steeped his long, thin fingers in front of his mouth, oddly mimicking his hated rival, Dumbledore. He was considering what the ancient looking wandmaker had said, analyzing how it would affect plans that were in motion, and plans that were yet to start.

“Very well, after I collect the materials needed, you will create a wand for me that will be the greatest the world has ever known. Goyle!” The Dark Lord called out.

The large Death Eater reentered the room, followed by another tall, thin Death Eater. They both knelt, but Goyle spoke first, “How can I serve you, My Lord?”

Voldemort ordered Goyle, “Take Ollivander and give him a bedroom. Have Mulciber ward his door and windows so that he can not escape, but treat the wandmaker with utmost respect. He is to come to no harm, do you understand?” The last was spoken with such menace and threat that the large, stupid Death Eater was quite sure that whatever injury came to Ollivander would be visited upon him tenfold.

“As you wish my Lord.” Goyle bowed, then led the old man out of the room.

The dark lord then turned his attention to the man who remained, “What news do you bring me, Mulciber?”

MacNair rose and spoke, “We have received an answer from the Albanians, my Lord. They have agreed to join us and offer any assistance they can. They have also sent a gift.”

Voldemort's non-existent eyebrows rose at the news, “And what did they send?”

“A dragon, my Lord, and the means to control it.” Was MacNair's reply.

“Most intriguing.” New plans and possibilities exploded through the Dark Lord's mind before he shook himself and focused. “Give me your arm, I must call my inner circle.”

Not more than ten minutes later, the entire inner circle of Death Eaters were kneeling in front of the throne.

“My loyal followers, I shall be leaving tomorrow to attend business outside the country for a time. You are to continue the plans I have explained to each of you as well as continuing the attacks on the Muggles, Mudbloods, and blood traitor filth. Be mindful that you each complete your tasks, for I shall be less than forgiving upon my return if you fail.” A chill went down the spine of all in the room at the cold malevolence in the sound of the Dark Lord's voice. “Go now.”

As one the group rose and turned to leave. “Lucius, stay for a moment,” declared Voldemort.

The blonde haired man stopped and turned, awaiting more instruction from his master. The high cold voice spoke again, “You have informed your son of his tasks while at Hogwarts?”

“I have, my Lord, he is most eager to do your will,” said Malfoy.

“Good, remind him, though, that he is not the only set of eyes and ears I have at the school. I will know if he fails. And so will you,” the snake faced man threatened once again.

Lucius' already pale face lost more color at the threat, “Yes, my Lord.” He turned and left at a wave of the Dark Lord's hand, leaving the evil wizard alone to prepare for his journey.

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“Wow. He doesn't do things by half, does he?” Eric Granger asked after he finished reading through the consort contract that Harry had just left them with. He was the last of the group to read through it, but judging by the dazed expressions on the faces of the ladies in the room, he wasn't the only one who was impressed.

Hermione came out of her shock first, being the first to have read it, "No, no he doesn't. This is amazing."

"Could you explain it to those of us who don't understand?" Asked Celia. She was still a little unclear as to what all of this meant. The girls had told her how backwards the Wizarding World was, but she didn't see how this contract would fix anything.

Luna spoke up, her voice unusually serious, "Basically, if we sign this with Harry, we will be set for life. That is, assuming we would each be willing to bear a child for him by the time we turn twenty five."

Seeing the confusion still evident on the Granger matriarch's face, Tracey explained more, "Essentially, by aligning us with both the houses of Potter and Black, two very old and influential families, he will allow us to circumvent a great many of the old Pureblood laws designed to keep women and non-Purebloods in the lower end of society. He also will be opening his vaults to us, making us some of the wealthiest women in the United Kingdom, if not all of Europe. Altogether, it means we can do whatever we want with our lives and not have many, if any, obstacles."

Blaise sat back with a thoughtful expression on her face. "I just can't figure out what he's trying to get from all this. I mean, he's giving us so much, he has to be asking something in return."

Hermione looked at her friend and shrugged, "He's not asking for anything in return. He's just trying to keep us safe, make our lives better. His conscience wouldn't allow him to ask for anything in return. He'd feel like he was using us and that would tear him up inside."

"So, which way are we leaning on this? There really isn't much of a downside for us." Daphne said.

"That's something that has me curious." Said Eric, "This reads more like a will than a contract. It's like he isn't planning on living past seventeen."

Celia spoke quietly, "I honestly don't think he does think he'll live much longer. Everything he's been doing points to that. He's setting

everything up so that the people he cares about will be taken care of, and he seems to be keeping himself emotionally disconnected from everyone. I'm really worried for him."

Tracey spoke up next, an anxious waver in her voice, "But what about all the training he's doing? I mean, he wouldn't be working so hard if he thought it was useless, would he?"

"He's not training to win," answered Luna, "he's training so that he will last long enough to take Voldemort out with him."

"Why would he think that? I don't understand." Said Daphne.

Hermione grabbed Daphne's hand as she answered, "You saw how Harry was treated growing up. He's got severe self-confidence issues. At times I think he feels like he doesn't deserve to be loved. Now, with Sirius gone, he doesn't feel like he has anyone left. At least, no one around that wants him in their lives forever. That's why he was able and willing to set up this contract."

Tears had started forming in the eyes of all of the teenage witches. The redhead squeezed her girlfriend's hand and said in a commanding voice, "We need to help him see he's wanted. If we sign this contract, we'll be able to stay with him wherever he goes, so we can keep him from sliding into depression."

Celia liked what she was hearing, "So you've all decided to sign?" Five nodding heads was her answer. "Good, I'm very proud of you all for trying to help him. It's not going to be easy and it's not going to go quickly, but I think you can do it."

"How do we help him, mum?" Asked Hermione.

"Well, the first thing you can do is break the touch barrier he has. He needs positive physical contact, something I don't think he's had much of in his life. Start slowly, squeeze his hand or his shoulder. Ruffle his hair, light touches like that. Eventually he'll get to the point where he doesn't tense up when someone hugs him. Emotionally, you need to get him to talk to you. Don't force him to, just let him know that you're there for him."

Eric broke in to his wife's lesson. "Just keep in mind that he's probably going to have a breakdown at some point. He's obviously bottling up all of his emotions, particularly the ones dealing with the loss of Sirius. Make sure you're there for him when he does." When Eric noticed that all of the girls were yawning, he sent them off to bed, saying that they would sign the contract with Harry in the morning.

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Journal of Harry Potter, 26th August 1996.

The girls signed the contract yesterday. It's good to know that I can protect them easier, help them live their lives the way they will be happiest.

I'm still on the outside, though. My best friend. My most important friend has this whole life outside of our friendship. It's good, though. It means my loss won't hurt as much.

Tried talking to my other best friend. Ron just glared at me and walked away. That hurt. Ginny seems wary and confused. Like she still doesn't know what to think. I spoke with her briefly. She's still with Dean and he's doing well. He was visiting Seamus. Apparently Ron's been writing Lavender Brown a great deal. Strange couple, but who am I to judge? Hopefully his dates go better than mine and Cho.

I've been able to get back into my mindscape. Thought it would be a good idea to map it out some. I always start out in the forest. Guess that just has to do with my state of mind right now. Next to the vast forest on one side is a huge mountain range. The mountains are hiding something. Something important, but I can't figure out how to get to what they're hiding. On the other side of the forest is what seems to be a bottomless pit. My very own mental pit of despair.

A flat glade is opposite the mountains from the dark forest. It's my 'happy place.' Unfortunately it's rather small. Between it and the pit is a sea filled with both normal water and my magical water. I'm calling it my sea of tranquility. It's obviously where I go when I'm doing my Tai Chi.

Except for some of the larger trees sticking out of the forest, everything is covered in the thickest fog I've ever seen. Doesn't matter that I can't see anything, other than what's under the mountains, I mapped it all out before the fog became too thick.

An owl just landed on my desk. A letter from Dumbledore requesting a meeting tomorrow before dinner. He says it's to discuss my training and my appointment with Madam Bones on Thursday. What a load of shite. I don't know how he found out about the contract so fast, but I guarantee he'll try to talk me out of it 'For the Greater Good.'

That's a load of shite, too. How can there be a 'Greater Good' if the only people left are the ones who claim to have reformed?

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"Ah, good afternoon, Harry!" Exclaimed Dumbledore jovially.

"Professor." Responded Harry responded shortly with a nod.

Harry sat in his meeting room with Lupin, Tonks, and Moody. They had just finished his work-out. True to what Moody had predicted, Harry was now fighting three golems set at Master Auror levels while his instructors fired stinging hexes at him. He was winning, too.

The young wizard sat quietly, allowing the old man to dictate the direction of the conversation at first. Harry was in no hurry to discuss his decisions regarding his friends, though it would have to happen eventually; they would need to alert the Headmaster of their need for new rooms.

So, the two sat staring at each other, though Harry didn't meet the old man's eyes for fear of getting his mind read. It was a veritable pissing contest of patience between the two.

Dumbledore broke first, "I've spoken to your tutors about the progress you've made this summer. They are very impressed at what you've accomplished. What are your thoughts on the matter?"

With a nod of thanks to his tutors, Harry said, "It's a good start, but I have a long way to go before I'm really to face tall, pale, and snaky again."

The old wizard nodded and moved on to the next topic, "Now, for your meeting with Amelia on Thursday, I can come here to collect you at-

Harry cut off the professor, "No, thank you, sir. I've already made arrangements with Tonks and Moody to escort me. We'll be perfectly safe."

"Yes," replied a surprised Headmaster, "but I thought it would be beneficial if I were to accompany you during the meeting."

The green eyed student merely shook his head, "I appreciate your concern, but I'm going to need to learn to deal with these things on my own before long. Why not start now with someone I can trust?"

The two wizards stared at each other again. A true battle of wills, but Dumbledore broke, once again over the iron will of the younger man. "Very well, Harry. I shall trust your judgment. Is there anything else you wish to discuss?"

"Yes, sir." Answered Harry immediately. "We discussed the Fidelius Charm protecting this house before. When do you plan on changing it over to me? You've had three weeks and I've not heard a lick about it. I told you we would find a way to break and recast it if you didn't help us. We have. The ball is in your court, professor. You can either fix this yourself before I leave for school, or we fix it for you."

Remus raised a shaky hand to ask a question, speaking when Harry nodded at him, "How do you plan on breaking the Fidelius, Harry?"

Harry's smile was decidedly marauder-like in nature. "Can't keep a secret if it's not true anymore, can you?"

Tonks' face paled when she realized what he meant, "You would do that, Harry? Kick the Order out?"

The boy-with-all-the-power nodded, "I would. This is my home, Tonks. I don't like not having control over who knows about it and who doesn't."

Moody nodded his approval, "I like the way you think. Constant Vigilance!"

Dumbledore sighed and stroked his beard, conceding victory to Harry. "Very well, I will come by tomorrow and we will transfer the secret to you."

The boy shook his head and said, "Tomorrow is no good for me, sir. I have some previous appointments. Friday would work best for me."

The Headmaster's eyebrows shot into his hairline, "Previous appointments? I am unaware of any such appointments."

Tonks, helpfully, chirped in, "Right, well, he wouldn't want you to know that Mrs. Granger is taking him to the Money Bank and the Wank Bank."

Harry's air of maturity collapsed as he groaned and slammed his forehead into the table. "Yes, thank you, Tonks."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled madly, before he calmed himself and said, "Ah, yes. I believe this has to do with the contract your female friends just signed?"

The raven haired wizard scowled before he said curtly, "Yes, sir, it does. But I'm not willing to discuss that at this time. You aren't going to talk me out of it. I promised I would protect them and this is the best way I could think of. We will have an issue pertaining to housing at Hogwarts, but that can be discussed later, if you prefer."

The Headmaster's twinkle diminished slightly at the realization of yet another lost battle to this young wizard. "Yes, I believe I know the rule you are referring to. We can discuss that on September first at Hogwarts. If there is nothing else, I shall be off. I will return Friday to take care of the Fidelius issue. Ta ta."

Harry shook his head ruefully at Tonks. "Wank bank? Such romance."

Tonks stuck her tongue out and stood with the others to leave Harry to the rest of his day.

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It was a decidedly strange group that made their way to the Sperm Bank the next day. A sullen and nervous looking teenage boy, two gorgeous twenty-something women, and a beautiful forty year old. It was decided that, since it was a trip to Gringotts and Muggle London, Fleur and Tonks would be all that Harry and Celia needed as guards.

"Don't know what you're so worried about, Harry." Chirped Tonks as they marched from Diagon Alley towards the Sperm Bank that was closest (still about a mile away). Harry had submitted his contract to the Goblins and created a will that he had carefully thought out over the past two weeks. It was all handled very efficiently in about an hour and a half. "It's not like it's something you haven't done before." She continued unmercifully.

Harry turned beet red and stumbled in his embarrassment. "Erm...No. No it isn't something I've done." He said bashfully.

It was Tonks turn to stumble in surprise. "What?! You mean you've never polished one off? Merlin! No wonder you were so angry last year! I'd go crazy too if I didn't buff my muffin at least once a week."

Harry mumbled his response, though it was clear enough for the three women to hear, "Well, the environment at Privet Drive wasn't exactly conducive to thinking sexy thoughts and I never felt comfortable with all the guys around in the dorm room, even with silencing charms."

Celia thought the boy's head was going to burst into flame from his blush. "Another piece of the puzzle that is this troubled young man." She thought, even as she spoke to reassure Harry, "It's really nothing to be embarrassed about. Masturbation is a completely natural thing.

We all do it, every once in a while. Right, Fleur?" Mother Granger ended looking pleadingly at Fleur for some back-up.

The French women did not disappoint, "Oui, I 'ave done eet, too. I will sometimes give myself a hand when Beell is away."

The ever-helpful metamorph decided to weigh in again, "So, Harry. Need any pointers? You know, other than grab and stroke?"

"Grrk!!!" Responded Harry.

"Ah, here we are." Interrupted Celia, before Tonks could torture Harry some more. No matter how amusing it was.

Once again, the appointment went efficiently. Celia talked to the doctor and Harry filled out the appropriate paperwork before being led by a nurse back to a private room. He did his business, filling three cups and eliciting a muttered "Impressive" from the nurse before being ushered back to his escorts.

Harry refused to meet the eyes of anyone for the rest of the night, which was good because he would have seen smirks and knowing glances thrown his way.

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The next day, Harry was escorted once again by the sprightly young metamorph, but they were joined by the grizzled Master Auror Moody. The trip to the Ministry building was made in near silence. Harry was mentally preparing himself for whatever was to come. He knew that he would be tested in a way, but he didn't know how. He was also unaware of what Madam Bones would want to speak to him about, so he tried to keep himself calm.

After a short wait, Harry was called into the Head of the DMLE's office. He was greeted warmly by the woman, "Mr. Potter. A pleasure to see you again. Please, have a seat." Amelia Bones said, indicating the chair behind him.

"The pleasure is mine, Madam Bones, thank you." Harry replied as he sat.

"You're quite welcome, Harry. Now, there were two reasons I asked you to come today. The first being to thank you. If it weren't for your training this past year, I firmly believe that I would be dead, along with Susan and Hannah. We owe you our lives and we're extremely grateful."

Harry shook his head and spoke softly but firmly, "You owe me nothing, Madam Bones. Those two worked very hard last year to learn all they could. It was easy to teach them. They were pretty close to conjuring a Patronus, actually."

The look of pride of the older woman's face was unmistakable. "Yes, I've heard that you can conjure a fully corporeal Patronus. A stag, if I'm not mistaken."

"Yes, ma'am." Harry answered dutifully.

"Perhaps you'll be able to display that during your little exercise later. We still have three Dementors under our control here for training purposes." She paused to look at Harry for a moment, seemingly sizing him up before speaking again. "I'm quite looking forward to seeing you in action. It should be fairly impressive from what Alastor, Tonks, and Kingsley have told me. Madam Marchbanks said she would be stopping by to see it as well."

It took all the control Harry had not to duck his head in embarrassment. Instead he looked steadily at the woman and said, "Thank you. I've worked very hard and they are excellent teachers, along with Remus Lupin."

Their discussion was interrupted by a knock on the door. When Madam Bones called out, "Enter," Madam Marchbanks entered the office, greeted both occupants and sat in the chair next to Harry's. She leveled an imperious look at Harry as she pulled out a piece of parchment with a list of people on it.

"Tell me, Mr. Potter," she began, "what does this list of names mean to you?" Harry looked over the list, but before he could answer, the old test proctor answered for him, "It's the list of students that were in fifth and seventh year last school year that were a part of your...study group. It's also a list of the students who achieved the highest scores on the Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s. Explain to me, Mr. Potter, how a fifth year could teach seventh years well enough for them to earn EE's and O's across the board?"

Harry merely shrugged and scratched the back of his head nervously, "I dunno, Ma'am. Hermione helped me learn the spells before the class and I just showed the others how to do them. How well they stuck was up to the members themselves."

Madam Marchbanks stared at Harry in silence for a few moments, enjoying watching him squirm before breaking into a warm smile and saying, "I am impressed, Mr. Potter and I'm looking forward to seeing what you can do during your little exhibition. In fact, I believe it's time. Don't you, Amelia?"

"Right you are, Griselda." Replied Amelia, and they all rose and left the room.

Harry's test was explained to him as they made their way to the Room of Requirement-like room in the Ministry building used for training. It was a large room that varied its terrain to different specifications and had a viewing platform looking down from above. The test itself would be threefold; the first would deal with various dark creatures attacking him, though any werewolves or vampires would be golems. The second stage would be a duel against a golem that would increase its skill level until Harry was defeated or the twenty-minute time limit ran out. The final stage was a hostage situation. Harry would have to save a prisoner from an unknown number of golems changed into Death Eaters.

The group of Ministry employees left Harry at the sealed entrance to the training room, it would unseal magically when the group was in the observation deck and ready. The young wizard fidgeted nervously, waiting for the door to open. He had a general idea as to what he would face, but he was still almost as nervous as before the final task

of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Finally after ten minutes of waiting, the door clicked open and he stepped through.

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Amelia Bones and her group of watchers were surprised when they stepped into the observation deck. Apparently, Harry's test had become widespread knowledge in the ranks of the Ministry. The room was crowded with people. Minister Scrimgeour, Senior Undersecretary Arthur Weasley, and Head Auror Connie Hammer were chatting amicably by the large window looking over the arena. A man who, judging by the robes he was wearing, could only be Head Unspeakable Croaker was standing by himself along the far wall.

Madam Bones raised both eyebrows and said, "I didn't know this was going to be a public display."

Minister Scrimgeour turned from talking with his colleagues and blustered to the Head of DMLE, "I wanted to see what kind of resource we have in young Mr. Potter. See if there is much stock in proclaiming him the 'Chosen One'." He missed the dark look that Arthur Weasley shot him at his implied treatment of Harry.

"And how, pray tell, do you plan on doing that?" Asked Madam Marchbanks archly.

The Minister smirked and said, "By throwing everything we've got at him." He turned toward the magical intercom, pressed the talk button and ordered, "Start the test, just like I explained to you, Dawlish."

A staticy "Yes, sir," was heard before the arena below the observation deck lit up and a visibly wary Harry Potter entered.

The arena was set up as a large forest area, much like the Forbidden Forest outside of Hogwarts, that was bathed in moonlight. In fact, as soon as the door had closed behind him, Harry heard the howls of three werewolves. One of the features of the training room was that is monitored and displayed all spells that were used.

The Unspeakable, Croaker, was standing in front of the read-out. He seemed surprised when Harry cast two non-verbal spells on himself before casting the disillusionment charm. "Hm, impressive," said that hooded man's deep, gravelly voice. "A silencing charm and a scent masking charm. That disillusionment charm is one of the best I've seen. I can barely track him."

The others in the room nodded their agreement, except for Moody, who could track the young wizard with his magical eye. Tonks gasped as the first of the werewolves made an appearance. "You've sent three Greyback level werewolves after him?" She asked in disbelief.

The Minister nodded curtly before saying only, "Everything we've got." He watched raptly as the boy dodged around the first werewolf, only to have the other two arrive in the area simultaneously. "Hmph. This might be over faster than I thought." Said Scrimgeour disappointedly.

"Perhaps not." Said Arthur Weasley smugly as Harry burst into motion. First, casting thick metal cables at the first werewolf, effectively tying it to a tree. He then conjured a large metal cage to fall around the second werewolf, trapping it. The last werewolf got a bead on where Harry was hiding and charged the wizard.

The young wizard held his ground until the charging beast leapt at full speed. Harry quickly conjured a metal wall between himself and the flying animal. A resounding clang was heard throughout the room and the werewolf fell to the ground, unconscious. Harry quickly conjured more cables, securing it to remove the danger.

Before he could turn around and gain his bearings, though, a powerful fist to his stomach sent the boy flying ten feet through the air. Just as he got to his knees, a kick to his chest sent him rolling another ten feet. From his spot on the ground, Harry raised his wand and cast Solaris and a blast of sunlight froze the master vampire in its tracks.

"Arthur, activate the listening charms." Said Moody, "I want to hear what's being said. Vampires like to taunt their prey. Let's see how the boy handles it."

Senior Undersecretary hit the button and sure enough, a deep, malevolent voice was heard in the room. "Clever trick, boy. But tricks won't be enough to defeat me. I'll be dining on your heart's blood tonight."

"Very true." Harry replied, rolling up his sleeve and slicing open his arm. "There's no way I can beat your speed or power. You might as well come and have a taste."

The blood dripping down the boy's arm was too much of a temptation for the vampire and it glided forward, grasping Harry's arm and sucking deeply from the cut. He didn't notice the smirk on Harry's face until he felt a burning sensation from deep within his undead body.

Clutching his stomach with pale hands, the vampire groaned in pain and rasped, "Wh-What trickery is this?"

A smug Harry chuckled as he said, "Oh dear, did I forget to tell you that I've got a mixture of Basilisk venom and Phoenix tears pumping through my veins? Probably doesn't work too well with your delicate constitution. Let me help with that. Solaris Maximus!" A blinding beam of light exploded from Harry's wand connecting with the pained vampire, burning it to ashes.

Harry quickly healed the cut on his arm and began moving further away from the captured werewolves, not wanting to accidentally set them free in a later fight. The hair on the back of his neck stood up as he felt a cold air blow through the trees surrounding him. He knew exactly what was coming for him when a sense of despair settled upon him. The young wizard closed his eyes for a moment. Simultaneously blocking the sounds of his mother's screaming and bringing up a happy thought. A slight smile graced his lips as he recalled one of the dinners he had with the Slytherin girls at Privet Drive and the feeling of domesticity that went along with it.

Green eyes snapped open and locked onto the approaching forms of three Dementors. Harry's voice rang out with "Expecto Patronum!" The bright, silvery form of Prongs leapt out of Harry's wand and

immediately charged at the Dementors, sending them flying away in terror. The young wizard looked around, trying to assess the direction of the next threat to approach.

Madam Bones' voice rang out over the arena. "That's all for the creatures part of the test, Harry. Very well done! You can see a golem approaching from your left. The next stage is a duel. The golem will quickly adjust itself to your skill level, so be careful. The duel will begin when you bow. Take your time to prepare yourself."

Shocked silence reigned in the observation booth as they watched Harry duel the magical golem. The young wizard kept his tactics decidedly defensive, not attacking much at all. Though when he did attack, it was devastating. Harry viewed this stage of the test as more practice. His tutors recognized this much, but decided not to say anything to the others. They understood that the boy wanted to keep his true level a secret. Although, even they were still unaware just how far he had come with his wandless magic. The display he was showing at the moment, though, was enough to severely impress the other viewers.

When the time limit was up, the weak voice of Minister Scrimgeour echoed over the arena, "That's enough for now, Mr. Potter. You will have a thirty minute break while we set up the last task. Please exit through the door that is now opening."

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Harry sat in silence in the waiting room. He was drinking some water and had a bit of the food provided. He had gone to the medic to heal up his ribs as much as possible from the vampire attack, although, they were still sore. The young man was aware that the Minister was there, and if the Minister was there, so were at least two or three others. Scrimgeour was enough of a diva that he always needed a posse with him, all crowded in that room to enjoy a show.

Anger bubbled behind the green eyes of the wizard. "They want to make a spectacle of me? Fine. I'll give them a bloody spectacle they'll never forget." He thought as he went through his pockets, charmed bottomless by Hermione, pulling out the tricks from the Weasley

twins' store. He took an inventory, knowing that each item would be useful. By the time he had finished, an Auror had come back through to explain what was expected of him.

Get in, get the hostage, get out. Minimal injuries. Easy enough. On with the show.

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An eager Rufus Scrimgeour turned to his fellow observers, "Let's see what he does with this one. The golems have been set up with specific personalities. All Death Eaters, from junior level to Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange. We even set up the hostage golem as his friend, Miss Granger."

Tonks and Moody shared a long look at this news. This would certainly be one hell of a show.

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The arena had changed from something resembling the forbidden forest to something resembling the town of Hogsmeade. At least, what Harry would assume was the residential section of Hogsmeade. The way the main road twisted back and forth and the way all the houses sat crookedly on their lots let Harry know that Muggles had no hand in designing this street.

Knowing that there were at least eight Death Eaters lurking about the area, Harry immediately disillusioned himself again. He had to find out where this hostage was and who was the guard. The easiest way to do that was to catch a grunt and persuade the information out of them. Harry knew that he couldn't use some of the techniques he otherwise would have, because of the audience watching.

The nearly invisible wizard crept from shadow to shadow, trying to seek out one of the enemies lurking about. After twenty minutes of searching, Harry stumbled across two men in Death Eater robes stalking along one of the side alleys, chatting with each other. Harry didn't give the patrolling wizards a chance to see through his

disillusionment charm and silently stunned both before they could think.

Harry quickly bound and re-stunned one Death Eater, then bound and revived the other.

The evil lackey opened his eyes and stared into glowing green eyes and felt his bowels release in his pants.

Harry spoke so coldly the observers were surprised not to see his breath, "Who is the hostage and where are they being held?"

Mesmerized, the Death Eater couldn't think to lie. "The Mudblood Granger! She's in the building at the end of the main road."

Harry, forgetting that this was just an exercise at the mention of Hermione, let his anger flare up from behind his eyes, causing the captive man to void his bowels in his pants again. "How many guards and who is in charge?"

"F-f-f-four guards in the house, plus Lucius and Bellatrix! She's in the basement!"

Done with the Death Eater, Harry snarled and slammed the man's head against the nearest wall, completely forgoing magic. He dropped the now unconscious man to the ground, brought his emotions back under control, and spoke to himself. "Don't go running off half cocked again, Potter. That's how you lost Sirius. Think. They're probably going to be expecting me to rush the front door once I hear who they have, so they'll concentrate the guards on the ground floor. Maybe if I go through a second floor window and hit them from behind coming down the stairs."

Plan firmly in place, Harry checked his disillusionment charm and, keeping to the shadows, approached the house at the end of the street. It was a large, three story house. Not as large as a manor, but obviously the home of a wealthy individual. The face of the house stared down the length of the street, so Harry went around to the right side.

He silently cast temporary sticking charms on his hands and shoes, allowing him to scale the wall and gain access to a second story window. Opening an unlocked window, Harry slipped into an unused bedroom and crept out into the hall. The top of the stairs were just to his left as he came out of the room. Casting silencing charms on his feet and every step, he slowly made his way down the stairs to the unsuspecting Death Eaters below.

Three of the four guards were watching the front door. One sat on the steps, another sat on a chair in the hall, and the third was watching out the window for Harry's approach. The young wizard took a second to calm himself before acting. A quick *Silencio* and *Petrificus Totalus* had the man on the stairs, and was followed by two silent *Stupefys*, nullifying the threat at the front door.

Harry bound all three wizards and levitated them upstairs into the bedroom he had used to enter the house. He closed and locked both the window and the door as he left, preventing their escape. He also snapped their wands, further incapacitating them. After making his way back down the stairs, he found the fourth guard standing at the back door, unaware of what was happening around him. Another silent stunning spell and the man was out of action.

The boy found the door to the basement and made his way silently down the stairs. What he found made his blood run cold. The room the stairs emptied into was large and empty. Empty except for the three people occupying it. Lucius Malfoy was leaning idly against a wall, rolling his wand between his fingers. He was watching as Bellatrix LeStrange tortured a bound Hermione who was already beaten and bleeding.

Harry saw red, and before he could think about what he was doing, shouted "*Reducto!*" pointing his wand at Malfoy. The elder wizard had no time to react and a hole the size of a bowling ball appeared in his chest before he slumped to the ground, dead. The enraged young wizard quickly spun back behind the cover of the wall separating the stairs from the room in time to miss the green killing curse that had been shot at him.

Before he could formulate a plan, Bellatrix's voice rang out. "I'm impressed. Wee baby Potter has grown a back bone. It's all for naught, though. You've given up your surprise and I've still got your girly, here. If you don't want her to be a stain on the walls of this place, you'll throw out your wand. Now."

The crazy woman was surprised when a wand was thrown across the room and clattered at her feet. She called out again, "Come out, boy, and watch this bint die. I think I'll even use your own wand to do it!" Bellatrix cackled in glee and picked up the loose wand as Harry stepped out into the open. She pushed Hermione to the ground on her back, wanting to see the light of life leaving the girl's eyes as she died.

Expecting a green light to flash when she screamed Avada Kedavra, she was surprised when the wand in her hand turned into a rubber chicken. She was even more surprised when Harry, holding his real wand, cast three curses at her. The first, a bone breaking curse, turned all the bones in the hand holding her own wand to dust. The second, a puncturing hex that sent a hole straight through her heart, and the final a severing hex that removed her head from her shoulders.

Harry, wand hand shaking, took a deep breath and looked down at Hermione, only to see the inert form of a magical golem not in use.

The voice of Amelia Bones rang out in the house. "V-Very well done, Mr. Potter. Please return to the staging area. We will collect you there."

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Amelia turned back to Moody and Tonks and asked, "What the hell have you been teaching him?"

Moody replied simply. "To win."

The Minister almost looked hungry at the display he was just shown, "Yes, good show at that. The boy will be an excellent resource once he is at our disposal. The 'Chosen One' indeed."

Arthur, having enough of the Minister's dealings spoke up, "You're an idiot, Rufus, if you think Harry is going to let you use him like that. He's not a resource, he's a sixteen year old boy with the weight of the wizarding world unjustly put on his shoulders. Back off of him or you'll go the way of Fudge, I guarantee it."

The Minister blustered himself up, ready to offer a loud, if not well thought out, rebuttal. Only to be cut off by Moody, "Listen to him, laddy. It's what you're paying the man for. The boy doesn't trust the Ministry one lick and you trying to use him like a puppet will have him on the first ticket out of the country as soon as he's done with Hogwarts. Do you really want to be known as the man who drove the Boy-Who-Lived out of the country?"

The group filed out of the room, leaving a chastised Minister to think about his options.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Harry collapsed on his bed in Grimmauld Place, exhausted. His test and the meeting afterward took up most of the day. By the time he had been able to excuse himself, file his Consort Contract, and get back home it was past dinner. He had eaten a quick snack and was now laying on his back staring at the ceiling.

The young man was still shaken up over seeing Hermione beaten and bleeding. Even though it wasn't real, the image would not leave his mind's eye and it chilled him to the bone. Fear of losing his best friend, mixed with the determination to protect her robbed him of all of his energy and he passed out early into a fitful, nightmare-filled sleep.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Journal of Harry Potter, 31st August 1996.

The last few days since my test (read: Dance, Harry Dance for the Minister!) have passed by quickly. We leave for Hogwarts tomorrow.

Dumbledore came by Thursday and transferred the Fidelius to me. We changed the secret, too. 'The house formerly owned by Sirius Black is located at Number 12 Grimmauld Place.' That way, the damn charm won't fail once the war is over. The old man didn't put up much of a fuss about it. Maybe he isn't as bad as I thought. We'll see what happens tomorrow with the whole rooming situation.

Had an interesting conversation with Hermione's mum. I don't know what to think of it yet, though.

"Harry, can I talk to you for a moment before you go off to bed?" Celia asked at the entrance to Harry's door.

"Sure, come in, what can I do for you?" Replied Harry, beckoning Mother Granger to enter and sit.

"Well, I just wanted to say 'thank you' one last time before you all headed off to Hogwarts tomorrow. It really means a lot to Eric and me that you are letting us stay here, even when you're gone."

Harry blushed lightly and replied, "It's really not a problem. You mean the world to Hermione and I just want to keep you safe. It's the least I can do. And don't worry about Hermione and the girls at Hogwarts. I'm going to do everything I can to keep them safe, too."

Celia smiled and cupped Harry's cheek. She looked deep into his emerald eyes and said, "I know that you will Harry. I won't be worried so long as you are near them. Just, let them look after you, too."

Mesmerized by the love and compassion showing in Celia's eyes, Harry replied quietly, "I will."

Mother Granger broke the moment and stood. She ruffled Harry's hair as she left and said, "Good. If you all take care of each other, I know you'll get through everything just fine. Goodnight, Harry."

"Goodnight, Celia."

He thought, "What did she mean, 'Let them take care of you?' I don't know. I'll worry about it later. For now, I need to rest. Tomorrow is bound to be a long day. Back to Hogwarts."

Chapter 11:

Green eyes slowly opened early in the morning on September first. Harry got up, put on his work-out clothes and headed down to the basement, just like he had every day for the past month. Not that he noticed, but his physique showed the results of the nutrient potion and constant exercise. Where he was skinny and weak before, now the boy was trim and muscled. He could run ten kilometers fairly easily and he was as agile as a cat. His body was ready for war.

Finished with his work-out Harry went upstairs to his room to shower, dress and finish packing. One of the last things he put in his trunk was a piece of paper that he had received from Madam Marchbanks after his "test" at the Ministry. He glanced at it a second before he put it away, thinking, "Hermione's going to lose it when I tell her about this. I'll let her know when we find out who the defense professor is."

Chuckling, Harry went back downstairs to eat some breakfast. He had decided that he would try and mend some fences with the Weasleys this morning, if possible.

The boy was the first into the kitchen that morning. Deciding that the easiest way into a Weasley's heart was through food, Harry told Dobby to prepare breakfast for the Grangers and the girls while he cooked for himself and the Weasleys.

Molly was the first to enter, preparing to do the job that Harry was already working on. She froze at the door, nervous, sad, and angry looks battling for dominance on her face. Before she could settle on one, Harry spoke first in a firm voice, "Please, sit down, Mrs. Weasley, I have something I'd like to say."

The Weasley matriarch raised her chin in defiance, but did as Harry asked and sat. The teen wizard finished the batch of scrambled eggs he was cooking and set them aside with a warming charm. He grabbed a towel and wiped his hands, then clutched at it nervously. "You are the first person I can remember acting in any way motherly towards me. The hug you gave me after the Tri-Wizard meant more to me than you'll ever know." Molly's eyes filled with tears as she looked Harry in the eyes.

Harry continued after a short pause to let what he had said, and the sincerity behind it, sink in before continuing, "Those girls upstairs, they've come to mean a lot to me; above and beyond my promise to protect them, which I still take very seriously. When you started spouting off at them like my Aunt Petunia would yell at me, it cut me deep. I admit I overreacted, and I'm sorry for that. I should not have yelled at you and Ron like I did, but I was just so hurt and angry."

Molly now had tears running down her face and she looked horrified that she had acted in any way like Harry's awful relative. "I know this isn't how you were raised and not what you believe, but people are going to live their lives as they see fit. You can't control who you fall in love with, you just have to accept it. It's what I'm training so hard to fight for. Not to kill Voldemort or his Death Eaters, but so that people can live life as they see fit; that's what this all means to me."

The woman sat for a few moments in silence before looking up and meeting Harry's eyes again. "When did you become so wise, Harry? You're parents would be so proud of the man you are becoming. I'm sorry for the way I acted. I've had a few long talks with Arthur and you're both right. I don't have any say in who anyone falls in love with, nor should I. Come here, Harry. Let me hug you again." Smiling from ear to ear, Harry did just that. He still didn't trust the woman completely, but at least some of the unpleasant feelings were gone.

Arthur strode into the kitchen and his face lit up when he saw the reconciliation taking place. Rather than making a big deal of it, he simply clasped his hand on Harry's shoulder, nodded approvingly and said, "What's for breakfast?" Harry laughed and served some bacon and eggs.

The rest of the Weasleys, save Ron, and various order members wandered in and were served by Harry. Everyone was amazed by how delicious Harry's cooking was. He felt he didn't need to remind them why his cooking was so good, so he merely accepted their praise and continued cooking.

Noticing that it was approaching eight thirty, Harry asked the table in general, but Moody in specific, "What's the plan for getting to King's Cross? I assume we'll have to leave soon."

"Aye, Lad," responded Moody. "We leave in about half an hour. There will be cars waiting for us about two blocks away. No sense in telling the Ministry right where we are. We'll walk by twos with an Order guard between every other pair. I'll be leading and Remus will bring up the rear."

"Shrinking and Featherlight charms on all our belongings? Except for our pets, of course," asked Harry. He got an approving nod from Mad-eye before he continued, "Well, then, I'm going to head up and let the girls know the plan. I'll be back down in a few."

Harry raced up the stairs and decided to alert the elder Grangers first. He found them in the muggle room, finishing their breakfasts and reading the Prophet. After relaying the pertinent information to them, Celia asked Harry, "Check on the girls, would you Harry?"

"It's where I'm headed next, Mother Granger." Harry replied with a cheeky grin as he slid out the door.

He checked on Tracey, Blaise, and Luna first. Each were packed and ready to go. He cast the Featherlight charms on all of their possessions and told them to head down to the entry way, which they did.

When Harry knocked on the next door, he was greeted by a clearly amused Daphne. The reason why she was so amused was apparent when the redhead opened the door the whole way. Hermione was standing by her trunk, a pile of clothes at her feet and two books in her hands.

"Be still my heart!" Cried Harry, "Hermione Granger hasn't packed the night before."

The brunette girl blushed and mumbled, "Would have done, if someone hadn't distracted me."

“Tsk, tsk, Hermione.” Teased Harry. “Blaming others for your lack of preparation. You kno-” the boy suddenly stopped his teasing to duck a book thrown by his female best friend. Raising his hands in supplication, Harry said, “Alright, enough fun, how can I help?”

“Pack!” intoned Hermione and all of her belongings stacked and folded themselves neatly into her trunk. “You can carry my things down,” grinned the youngest Granger.

A quick Featherlight and the teens were on their way down the stairs, where they had to sit and wait another ten minutes for Ron to find his lost socks and finish packing while simultaneously shoveling food into his mouth.

Once everyone had gathered and the appropriate charms were cast on their possessions, the group began filing out of the house. Harry found himself near the rear of the group, walking with Luna on his left. In days past, he would have been very awkward walking next to the odd little Ravenclaw, but over the summer the boy had grown to quite like the blonde girl. He tensed for a moment, though, when she wrapped her right arm around his left, grasping his bicep.

Harry looked down at the girl and raised a questioning eye. Luna merely shrugged, smiled serenely and rested her head against his shoulder. He had been finding it easier to communicate without words with all of the girls. Not as well as he could with Hermione, but pretty well none-the-less. Walking behind Harry and Luna, Celia smiled hugely. She saw the boy tense, but the fact that he didn't pull away was a step forward for him.

Other than Tonks stumbling several times over pebbles, uneven ground, or air, the walk to the waiting Ministry cars was uneventful, as was the drive to King's Cross. Harry watched the hustle and bustle of the Muggles entering and leaving the trains. He sometimes wished that he could be blissfully ignorant to the horrors of the war that had begun.

Steadily, the Order and his friends went through the barrier to Platform nine and three quarters, carefully waiting for the Muggles

nearby not to notice. Harry was waiting patiently when he heard the voice of a very young girl behind him.

“It's right over there, mum! Don't you see the people disappearing into the wall?! It must be like the entrance to the Leaky Cauldron!”

The mother wrinkled her nose in distaste at the mention of the old pub. “Yes, dear, we didn't, but I'm still not too sure about all this magic business. Wouldn't you be much happier going to normal school?”

The young girl's face darkened in anger, “We've talked about this to death, mum! I'm not normal. I'll never BE normal. I am a WITCH! I can do magic! I want to learn how!”

The mother blew out a deep, long-suffering sigh. “Very well. Since I can't change your mind into doing something respectable with your life, let's see if we can't get you to this famed Platform Nine and Three Quarters.”

Harry, angered by this mother's lack of regard for her daughter's feelings stepped in at this point. “Excuse, miss?” He directed at the little girl. “I couldn't help but overhear you talking about Platform Nine and Three Quarters. I happen to know just how to get there.” The young wizard finished with a wink and a quick flash of his wand.

A look of pure delight blossomed on the young girl's face at the sight of Harry's wand. Conversely, a look of utter disdain appeared on the mother's face. This look, Harry was used to. It was the look his Aunt Petunia reserved just for him. So, he did what he felt was normal; he ignored the look and continued on with the little girl.

Kneeling to get more to eye level with the tiny eleven-year-old, Harry asked, “What's your name? Mine's Harry.”

“I'm Emma Grace Ashford, but people just call me Grace,” she answered, shaking Harry's offered hand.

"Grace is a very pretty name. Would you like some help going through the barrier? It can be a bit frightening the first time," replied Harry.

"I'm not scared of anything!" Declared the little blonde indignantly.

The teen wizard chuckled and said, "Of course you aren't. A true Gryffindor if I've ever heard one. Come on, I'll get you through the barrier. Mrs. Ashford? Will you be coming?"

Mrs. Ashford looked between the hopeful look on her daughter's face and the cool mask on the face of the teen boy and just couldn't bring herself to care. "No, Grace seems to be in good hands with you. I'll see you over Christmas Hols, write if you can have it delivered by normal means. Goodbye."

With a tears spilling out of her eyes, Grace Ashford whispered, "Bye Mum."

Seeing the devastated look on the beautiful face of this young girl, Harry was moved to try and comfort her, "It'll be alright, Grace, some people just take longer to accept magic than others. She'll realize that, although you're a witch, you're still her daughter and that she loves you." Hearing the comforting words and the sincerity in his voice, the little girl dove into Harry's arms, hugging him for all she was worth and crying pitifully into his neck.

Once she had finished crying, Grace pouted sorrowfully at Harry, "Easy for you to say, you're surrounded by family." She said, nodding at the almost gone crowd of people he had arrived with. Molly, Celia, and Remus were all looking his way in concern. They were the only ones, besides Harry, yet to go through the barrier.

Harry looked Grace in her eyes and said, "Those people are my friends. My family, the people I'm related to through blood, hate me. The first time I came through here, they just kicked me out of the car and drove off, laughing. If I hadn't run into some wonderful witches and wizards, I would never have made it to Hogwarts. Now, those people are as close as family. What do you say we go introduce you?"

Regaining her courage, Grace nodded and said firmly, "Let's go."

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Molly stood next to Celia and Remus and watched Harry comfort a small blonde girl, who was seemingly abandoned by her mother. The redheaded woman's heart filled with pride as Harry calmed the girl, took her hand and, pushing her cart for her, led the small girl over to their group.

Once Harry had joined them and made introductions, Remus chuckled and said, "You really can't resist a damsel in distress, can you?"

The teenager blushed and glared at the Marauder. "Are we the last ones through?" Harry asked, ignoring Remus' comment.

Grace didn't, though. "What do you mean, Mr. Lupin? What other damsels in distress?" Harry's face grew as red as a tomato and he scratched the back of his head in embarrassment.

Molly smiled and said, "We don't have time to go through all of Harry's heroics right now. So, once you're on the train, find my daughter, Ginny, or Celia's daughter, Hermione, and they will tell you all about it." Harry groaned at the excited look on Grace's face.

"Okay!" The boy said, "Let's get through the barrier. We have about a half hour before the train leaves. Why don't you come through with me this first time, Grace? You just stand next to me and hang on to your cart and we're going to run through the barrier. Ready?"

A shaky nod from Grace and Harry had them moving quickly through the crowd towards the barrier hiding the magical platform. At the last moment, Grace squeaked and closed her eyes, but held on tightly. Her eyes popped open when there was no crash, her mouth followed when she saw the great red train.

"It's amazing!" Crowed Grace as they continued moving out of the way of the entrance. Harry simply smiled down and squeezed the

girl's shoulder. "It absolutely is; come on, I'll introduce you to some friends,." Harry said, as he started to pull the little first year towards his group.

When they joined the others, Harry made the introductions. Pointing out Ginny, Luna, Hermione, Daphne, Blaise, and Tracey. Ron had, apparently, wandered off trying to find Lavender. The girls chatted amicably with Grace for a few moments, before they decided to try and get a compartment on the train.

Grace pouted greatly when Harry tried to get her to pick a compartment with other first years in it. The girls had already picked one out for them and Harry near the front and headed back out to say goodbye to the adults. "But, I want to stay with you! I won't know them!"

Harry smiled patiently, "That's kinda the point. You'll be spending most of your time with them for the next seven years; you might want to take the chance to get to know them early." When Harry found a compartment with three first year girls in it, and Grace didn't stop pouting, the older boy knelt and continued, "How about this; we drop your stuff in here, then we'll go out and say goodbye. I'll come back and drop you off here and I promise to check on you during the trip. If you haven't made some new friends, then you can join us in our compartment. Does that sound acceptable?"

The tiny blonde thought for a moment before nodding firmly. Harry knocked on the door and opened it. The girls already inside went wide-eyed when they realized who Harry was. "Excuse me, ladies, but I was wondering if you would be so kind as to share your compartment with my friend, Grace, here."

The eleven year old girls nodded their acceptance dumbly. "Excellent!" Exclaimed Harry as he placed the girl's trunk on the luggage rack. "We're just going to go say goodbye to some people; she'll be back in a moment for some proper introductions."

Harry led Grace back out to the adults who were fussing over their children, saying their goodbyes. They both got caught up in two near rib cracking hugs from Mother Granger and Mrs. Weasley. Each

saying for Harry to stay safe and how nice it was to meet Grace. A blast of the whistle from the Hogwarts Express told the children it was time to board and, with a few more teary hugs, they were back on the train.

Grace had stepped into Harry's compartment for a moment before the teen wizard led her back to her potential friends when a loud, male voice startled her. "Say, Harry! What're you doing with the midget?" Ron all-but shouted.

Hermione and Harry both opened their mouths to reprimand the tall redhead, but were beaten to the punch by Grace launching a swift kick to Ron's shins followed by an indignant shout of "OI! Watch who yer callin' midget, ya great lanky GOON!"

Silence reigned in the compartment.

Until it was filled with great peals of laughter and raucous applause. Ron, scowling indignantly, turned to Hermione and said, "We've got the Prefect meeting; come on." Then he stormed out of the compartment. The bushy-haired brunette hugged the blushing first year and said, "Well done, never be afraid to stick up for yourself." Harry, still chuckling, led Grace back to the other first year girls. As soon as he left the compartment they started peppering the blonde about how she knew the Boy-Who-Lived.

The young celebrity waded through groups of gawking wizards and witches to get back to his compartment, where he found Ginny Weasley finishing up an apology to the Slytherin girls and Luna.

"...So, I really am sorry for how I treated you lot. It wasn't fair of me to judge you before I actually met you. I would like the chance to get to know you all properly, if you're willing, that is," finished Ginny.

The Slytherin girls regarded the flame-haired girl coolly for a few moments before Daphne finally nodded, and said, "Thank you for the apology. We would like to try as well. From what Hermione and Luna have told us, I think we could get along quite well."

Ginny nodded and smiled, before excusing herself to find her boyfriend, Dean Thomas. Harry sat between Daphne and Luna and asked, "Think she was sincere?"

Luna answered serenely, "She was, but it will still take her time to actually open up to all of us again. She needs time to judge for herself that Daphne, Tracey, and Blaise aren't evil."

Harry's eyebrows shot up in surprise, "They aren't evil? Are you sure? I mean, I could've sworn Tracey called Blaise 'that evil cover hog' just last week."

Said cover hog screamed "Prat" and jumped at Harry, tickling him furiously. The two teens rolled off the bench, pulling Daphne with them. Luna and Tracey shared an amused look before diving onto the pile. Shrieks and laughs echoed through the compartment as the tickle war escalated.

After a few moments, the door to the compartment slid open and Harry looked up from the bottom of the pile into the amused faces of Neville Longbottom, Hannah Abbot, and Susan Bones. "Hey guys!" Harry said merrily, "Fancy seeing you here!"

"Yeah, Harry, imagine meeting up with students on a train to school," snarked Daphne from somewhere in the pile.

"Got room in your compartment for three more?" Asked a chuckling Neville.

"Absolutely!" Answered Harry before calling out, "Alright, people, let's unpile." As the girls slowly climbed off of Harry, the boy squeaked several times, "HANDS! HANDS!" He never quite knew who he was reprimanding, though.

Finally, Harry stood in front of the grinning Neville, shaking his hand. Neville's other hand was holding the hand of a giggling Hannah, who was standing next to an equally giggling Susan. "So," Harry began, "how were your summers?"

Susan spoke first, "Well, apart from that bit of excitement with Auntie, it was pretty boring." She leaned in and whispered behind her hand, "Finding something to do while these two snog in the bushes isn't my form of entertainment."

The girls and Harry laughed at Neville and Hannah's blushes. Susan continued in a normal voice, "Seriously, though, Harry, we can't thank you enough. If it wasn't for you – what you taught Hannah and me – the two of us and Auntie Amelia would be dead." She stepped forward and hugged Harry and gave him a kiss on the cheek. When Susan stepped back, Hannah stepped forward and hugged the blushing wizard, also whispering a thank you in his ear.

Once Harry got his face under control, he said seriously, "You don't have to thank me. What you know you learned by working hard yourselves. I'm just glad you are all alright. Now, enough of this emotional stuff, come and have a seat. It'll be a bit cramped, but some of us can share." Harry finished, winking at Neville, who grinned and blushed a bit.

Blaise hopped onto Tracey's lap, Luna sat on Daphne, while Hannah sat Neville down beside Luna and Daphne and plopped down on his lap. Susan and Harry sat across from each other closest to the door. After making introductions, Neville asked Harry, "Are you doing the DA again this year?"

The other wizard nodded emphatically and responded, "Absolutely. We have no idea who is going to be teaching us this year and whether they'll be any good or not. It's important, now more than ever, that we know how to defend ourselves." His statement was met with beaming smiles from everyone else in the compartment.

The teenagers chatted pleasantly for the next hour about non-important things. No one seemed keen on discussing the war, and this was just fine with Harry. Occasionally a DA member would poke their head in, say hello, and ask if the club was being continued this year. Everyone was very grateful to Harry for their OWL scores, and told him so. About an hour after the train had left, Hermione and Ron returned to the group, Hermione sunk down into the middle seat next to Harry.

"Where's my seat?" Asked Ron petulantly. Harry looked around and, seeing that none of the others wanted to give up their seat, stood and said, "You can have my seat, Ron. I need to go check on Grace, like I promised. I'll be back in a bit."

Harry reached the compartment where Grace was and could hear the sound of pre-teen girl laughter coming from it. Suppressing a shudder, Harry knocked on the door and opened it.

"Harry!" Grace shouted, "We don't actually have to battle a sphinx to get sorted, do we?"

The teenager chuckled and sat next to the little blonde. "No, you just put on an old hat and it yells out which house you go into. It's no big deal. Why don't you introduce me to your new friends?"

The young girl perked up and pointed out the other three girls in the room. A tall for her age, raven haired girl named Aubrey McCree, an average sized brunette named Jessica Drew, and another blonde named Adelaide Stevenson. Jessica and Adelaide sat in slack-jawed awe of Harry, being Purebloods, Aubrey blushed and waved her greeting.

Harry smiled at each girl and said, "It's a pleasure to meet you all. Now that I've seen you're okay, Grace, I'm going to head back to my compartment. Here are a few galleons, buy yourselves some treats from the cart when it comes by."

"Wait Harry!" Cried out Grace. When he turned and looked at Grace she said quietly, "Jessica and Adelaide were telling us about the different houses. What if we all don't end up in the same house? Will we really not be able to be friends?"

Harry smiled kindly and knelt down in front of Grace to be eye level, but spoke to all four girls. "It's completely your decision to remain friends no matter what house you end up in. I'm in Gryffindor and I have three friends in Slytherin. If someone gives you trouble for socializing with the kids in the other houses, you come to me; all four of you. Come see me if you have any problems. I promise I will

always have time to help you. Now, be good for the rest of the trip, and don't be afraid of Hagrid. He's a good friend and as gentle a man as they come. He's just a bit... larger, than most." He grinned knowingly, and left them to it.

The teenager slid the compartment door shut and headed back to his friends, happy that these girls might just begin to break down the silly house boundaries. Just as he was about to open the door to his compartment, a voice tentatively called out, "Hello, Harry."

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As soon as Harry had left the door, everyone started chatting again. Hermione was tempted to lash out at Ron for being so rude, but was distracted when Susan asked who the head boy and girl were. The bushy haired brunette rolled her eyes and answered, "Cho Chang and Zacharias Smith. They were absolutely useless in the meeting. They'll probably be even more useless during the year. No backbone whatsoever."

Susan laughed and said, "No, Hermione, tell us how you really feel. At least they were both in the DA. We could have some sway with them."

Hannah snorted, "Not likely. Chang's attempt with Harry failed miserably and her best friend betrayed us. Smith is a little shit who was only there to raise his grades and always challenged Harry. No, there will be no help from them, this year."

Neville squeezed his girlfriend's waist to try and calm her and said, "At least we don't have Umbridge this year. Any idea who the new Defense teacher will be?"

Daphne answered this, "Does it really matter? We'll all be learning from Harry anyway."

"Yes," said Luna serenely, "he really is an excellent teacher. We should have more time for meetings this year, since we won't have to be as secretive."

“Better not be too often! He'll still have Quidditch practice to be at.” Ron said, buffing his Quidditch Captain badge.

Hermione rolled her eyes and said, “Honestly, Ronald, there are things more important than a game! Harry is teaching people to defend themselves in a time of war!”

“Speak of the devil.” Neville said, cutting off the argument before it could get to legendary Ron versus Hermione levels. “Oh! It looks like Cho is going to have a word with him first.”

Tracey was surprised when she felt Blaise stiffen at the sight of Harry talking to Cho. “Problem, love?” She whispered into her girlfriend's ear.

Blaise whispered in anger, “What is that skank doing with Harry?” Tracey looked at her girlfriend with raised eyebrows, but before she could open her mouth, Luna noticed what was happening in the corridor.

“Oh!” Said the blonde Ravenclaw, “Cho appears to be apologizing to Harry.”

Ron was also looking at the two teens talking in the hallways, but couldn't hear what they were saying. “How do you know?” He asked.

Luna replied, “Her body language is screaming 'I'm contrite and apologetic.' Notice the hands clasped in front, the bowed head, and the downcast eyes.”

Everyone was watching the conversation, now. Hannah noticed the change in the older girl's posture next. “Harry must have forgiven her to get a smile like that.”

Cho's stance once again changed as her conversation with Harry continued. “What is THAT look?” Asked Neville.

Daphne snickered and answered. “Tilted head, doe eyes, seductive smile. All designed to make her more appealing to him. She's asking him out again.”

The group waited for Harry's answer and got it a few moments later. Susan laughed and said, "Shot down."

Blaise agreed, saying quite smugly. "There's no mistaking the look of rejected outrage on that girl's face."

Cho snapped something at Harry, turned, and stalked off down the corridor. The boy watched her go for a moment, before shaking his head and entering the compartment.

"Have fun, Harry?" Asked Neville.

Harry laughed and said, "Loads. I'm guessing you saw the conversation? Nothing like getting yourself in good with the Head Girl before the school year starts." He glanced around the benches, noticing no seats open. The boy shrugged his shoulders, flicked his wand, and sat in the comfortable chair he created in front of the window.

"Impressive." Said Susan.

Harry shrugged and asked her about what classes she wanted to take. The group chatted amicably for the next hour, staying away from any unpleasant topics.

Any pleasant feelings ended, though, when the door to the compartment slid open revealing the sharp, aristocratic face of Draco Malfoy. He was, as always, surrounded by his ape-like bookends Crabbe and Goyle. This time, Pansy Parkinson was with him, wanting to take a shot at her dorm mates.

The blonde boy started first, "Well, well, wAAAAAAaaaaaarrrrggghh."

As soon as the door had opened, Harry stood and flicked his wand, vanishing the window, flicked it again at Malfoy, then grabbed the Slytherin's robes and hurled the blonde boy out the window. He then flicked his wand again, replacing the window.

The compartment was filled with shocked silence for a moment before Harry pointed his thumb toward the window and said, "No ticket."

The girls that had stayed with Harry over the summer, as well as Hannah and Susan, burst into laughter at this, having seen the Indiana Jones movies.

"Harry!" Cried Hermione through her laughter. "You can't just go throwing people out of windows!"

"I can't?" Asked Harry.

"No." Said Hermione firmly, only giggling now.

"But what if the ferret deserved it?" Queried the boy.

"No." Repeated Hermione.

Harry heaved a great sigh and said, "Fine. Accio Malfoy."

After several seconds a faint, high pitched screaming could be heard from outside. It was steadily getting louder until Malfoy flew in the newly re-vanished window. Harry grabbed the ruffled boy out of the air and flung him into the group of Slytherins still standing at the door. He, once again, replaced the window before he turned to the spluttering Malfoy heir.

"Y-y-you'll pay for th-th-that P-p-p-potter!" Stuttered Draco.

Harry ignored the boy and turned to Ron. "He does a fair impression of Professor Quirrell, doesn't he?"

"When my father hears about-" Screamed the enraged Slytherin, only to have Susan cut him off.

"You mean, Lucius Malfoy, the escaped convict and wanted criminal? I think Auntie would be quite interested in knowing that you have been in contact with him."

Shaking with impotent rage, the boy raised his wand, but then lowered it again and stalked off when he was met by ten wands pointing back at him. Once the door was shut again, the group broke back down into laughter.

"That. Was. Brilliant!" Crowed Ron. "I've got to go tell Lavender!" With that the lanky redhead rushed out of the compartment.

"Snape won't be pleased when Malfoy cries to him about it," opined Neville.

Harry sobered a bit and said, "No, but I don't rightly care. I guarantee the git is planning on making my life more miserable than ever this year. What's one more thing?" He sighed, then sat down in Ron's spot, vanishing the chair he had conjured.

The rest of the train ride was uneventful. The boys went to the bathroom and changed, leaving the girls to change in peace themselves.

Harry waved a hello when he heard Hagrid bellowing to the first years. The half-giant smiled and waved back, then turned and herded the new students to the boats. He smiled at the sight of Grace and her three new friends gaping at the half giant.

Neville, Susan, and Hannah split off to find a carriage with Justin Finch-Fletchley and Ernie MacMillan.

A gasp drew Harry's attention back to Hermione. She was staring into the eyes of a Thestral. The girl could now see the skeletal horse after the fight at her house. She turned teary cinnamon eyes to Harry and Luna. "I'm so sorry I didn't believe you last year."

Daphne grabbed the brunette's hand and pulled her into the carriage saying, "Come on, love. It'll be okay."

Harry patted the beast's side before stepping into the carriage last. The ride up to the school was silent as they were reminded of the war that was being waged in the outside world.

After he helped his friends out of the carriage and turned to the great school., the last Potter took in his school from the top gaze finally came to rest on the open doors leading to the Entrance Hall, where a red-faced Severus Snape was waiting.

“Bugger.”

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Severus Snape stood at the doors of Hogwarts, watching the Boy-Who-Lived make his way up the steps with beetle black eyes glinting with rage. Once the child was within hearing range, the Potions Professor let a smirk grow on his face.

“Don't bother coming in, boy. The stunt you pulled on the train will guarantee your expulsion!” Snape drawled. Malfoy stood behind the angry professor and smirked.

Harry walked nonchalantly up to the Professor and said, “I didn't know conjuring a chair was an expulsion-worthy offense, Professor.”

The bat-like man snarled and reached forward to grab Harry's robes, stopping when a voice behind them said, “Ah, Harry. It's good to see you, my boy. I would like to see you in my office after the feast, we have things to discuss. Severus, I believe Professor Slughorn was looking for you at the Head table. Enjoy the feast, all.” The Headmaster said jovially as he artfully guided the Potions Master into the Great Hall.

“Yes, Potter.” Drawled Draco. “Enjoy your meal. It'll be the last you ever have at Hogwarts.” He, too, turned and marched into the Great Hall.

Just before heading to the Gryffindor table, Harry turned to his Slytherin consorts and said, “Be careful. Remember to check your food before you eat it, just like Moody showed us. If I don't see you before I go to Dumbledore's office, meet in the Room of Requirement.”

Daphne rolled her eyes and said, "We'll be fine, Harry. Go enjoy your meal. We'll see you soon."

With that the group split for the first time in a month. Hermione and Harry sat next to their year mates, while Luna sat in a spot saved for her at the Ravenclaw table next to Padma Patil. The young wizard watched his Slytherin consorts sit at the opposite end of the table from the Malfoy scion. The three girls settled back into the familiar faces of the 'Slytherin Untouchables' and as such, none of their other house mates dared go near them for fear of their limbs.

The students of Hogwarts chatted merrily with each other until the doors opened again and Professor McGonagall led in almost fifty young first years. Harry's gaze immediately sought out Grace and her friends and gave them each a smile and a nod. Each girl stood a little taller when they locked eyes with Harry.

The hat sang, once again, about unity amongst all the houses, leaving the Great Hall quiet and thoughtful.

"Oi! Harry!" Seamus whispered after seeing Harry's looks at the young girls. "They're a bit young for ya, don'tcha think?"

"Piss off, Seamus." Harry whispered back with a smile, taking any ill feelings out of his words.

"Why does there have to be so bloody many of them!" Complained Ron. "I'm starving."

"Language, Ron!" Snapped Hermione, quietly.

"Blimey, they're tiny this year!" Exclaimed Dean. "We were never that small, were we?"

Neville chuckled and answered, "I don't know if we were, but Harry was."

Professor McGonagall paused before reading the first name to glare at her sixth year Gryffindors, who had just burst out laughing. Once they were all quiet and looking properly chastised, she once again

looked down at her list and called out “Akens, Scott,” who went to Hufflepuff.

Four students went by, two Ravenclaws, a Slytherin and another Hufflepuff, before McGonagall called out “Ashford, Emma Grace.” The girl calmly walked forward and sat on the stool, where the hat was placed on her head and slid down to the tip of her nose. The hat paused for a long moment, before calling out, “GRYFFINDOR!” Grace squealed, all-but ripped the hat off and sprinted over to Harry and gave him a huge hug.

Harry smiled at the enthusiastic girl and said, “I told, you. A true Gryffindor.” She beamed at the boy and walked down to sit in the space left for first years. The sorting continued with equal numbers of first years going into each house. Jessica Drew went to Hufflepuff, Aubrey McCree went to Ravenclaw, and Adelaide Stevenson went to Slytherin.

The four first year girls were upset when they each went into separate houses. But, when they looked to Harry, who gave them another smile and nod, then each other, their backs straightened once more in silent agreement to remain close friends.

Before the noise of the students could pick back up, Headmaster Dumbledore stood and addressed the crowd. “I have several announcements to make, but they can wait until after the delicious feast. Tuck in!” With a clap of his hands, the food appeared on the tables and Ron nearly lunged onto the table to get at it.

Harry and Hermione each put sensible amounts of food on their plates and began to eat while surveying the Head table. Hermione swallowed the mouthful of food she had and turned to Harry to say, “Only one new face this year. I'm guessing that walrus looking man is Professor Slughorn.”

The wizard chuckled and said, “Seems to be. I just hope he's better at teaching defense than Umbridge.” The rest of the meal was taken up with talk of summers and OWLs and classes, until finally, the food disappeared and Dumbledore stood once again.

“For those of us who are new, Welcome. And to those of us who are returning, Welcome back. We have with us a new, but old, face. Returning to us out of retirement to teach Potions is Professor Horace Slughorn.” The fat, walrus looking man stood and waved to the bewildered applause that scattered through the room. Once the new Professor sat, the Headmaster continued, “Professor Slughorn decided to return to teach Potions because our former Potions Master, Professor Severus Snape, has seen fit to take up the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.” A gasp went through the crowd and everyone in the hall turned to look at Harry. Everyone knew about the loathing between the teacher and student, as well as Harry's love of Defense Against the Dark Arts. They were surprised and confused by the smirk on Harry's face.

As Dumbledore continued his speech, saying that any product from the Weasley twins was banned and that the Forbidden Forest was forbidden, Hermione leaned over the table and whispered fiercely at Harry. “Why aren't you more upset at this?”

Harry's smirk became a full smile as he pulled a piece of parchment out of his robes and handed it to Hermione, explaining, “I'm not upset because it doesn't affect me. Madam Marchbanks was at that 'test' at the Ministry. For my performance, she awarded me full marks on my Defense Against the Dark Arts NEWT. I got the letter the next day. I wanted to surprise you at the right moment. Surprise!”

“Harry!” She exclaimed, “This is amazing! I'm so proud of you.” Harry couldn't understand why Hermione's praise caused a warm feeling to spread throughout his body, so he didn't try and just reveled in it.

When Dumbledore dismissed the students, Harry whispered to Hermione, “Collect the girls and head to the Room of Requirement. Set it up however you want. I'll be there after my meeting.”

Hermione nodded and walked off, collecting Luna and the Slytherins, while Harry waited for the room to clear before heading to the Headmaster's office.

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On his way to the meeting, Harry decided that he would humor the Headmaster and play his game for as long as the old man wanted. Once the boy reached the gargoyle guarding Dumbledore's office, he realized he wasn't given the password.

"I'll start playing his games, after this one." Harry muttered to himself before speaking to the Gargoyle in an authoritative voice. "I don't know the password, but the Headmaster is expecting me, so either open up or I'm leaving." To his surprised, the Gargoyle stepped aside and the stairs started moving. Harry shrugged and stepped on, letting himself be carried to the top.

As always, just before knocking, he heard Dumbledore's voice call out, "Come in." The teen wizard entered the office and saw the old man sitting behind his desk flanked by McGonagall and Snape.

"Good evening Headmaster, Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape." Harry said politely, surprising each of the adults, though they hid it well.

"Good evening, Harry, have a seat, please." Replied Albus. Harry sat and looked patiently at the three teachers in front of him, waiting for one of them to speak.

Snape broke first, turning to Dumbledore. "Enough games, I want this whelp expelled. Immediately. He attempted to murder one of my students."

"Actually, Professor," Harry defended, "I did not try to murder anyone. I cast a very strong cushioning charm on dear Draco. He was returned to the train completely unharmed, if not a little...soiled."

"INSOLENT BRAT!" Screamed Snape, "You're just as arrogant as your father. Y-"

"Now, now, Severus, let us all remain calm." Said Dumbledore in his grandfatherly tone, before turning to Harry and continuing. "While, I realize that young Mr. Malfoy was not injured, I can not allow this type of action to go unpunished. Therefore I am taking fifty points from

Gryffindor and you will serve two weeks detention with Professor Snape.”

“Yes, sir.” Replied Harry, knowing that he would get punished, but not liking having to serve with Snape.

“Now, Harry, I believe that you had wanted to discuss room arrangements today.” Dumbledore stated. At Harry's nod, he continued, “We have a set of rooms near Gryffindor tower, unfortunately, they are not prepared adequately. They will be ready in three nights, is that satisfactory?”

Harry nodded again, saying, “Yes, sir, thank you, sir.”

Snape's temper let loose once again. “I refuse to allow my Slytherins to be subject to Potter's whims. Greengrass, Davis, and Zabini will be remaining in my house.”

“Where they will be subject to Malfoy's whims? I think not, Professor. They, along with Luna and Hermione, are my Consorts and as such, my responsibility. They will stay in my rooms with me, so I can protect them.”

Before Snape could explode again, McGonagall gasped and said, “There hasn't been a consort in more than fifty years! They each agreed to this?”

Harry nodded respectfully, “They did, ma'am. Each signed in blood of their own free will. The contracts have been filed at both the Ministry and Gringotts. It's all perfectly legal.”

“Why would they do this, Mr. Potter?” Asked a still flummoxed McGonagall.

“They did this, Professor, because it was the best way I could protect them. You needn't worry, though. I will not abuse their trust.”

Minerva smiled at one of her favorite students and said, “It never crossed my mind that you would, Mr. Potter.” Snape snorted in derision, but before he could make a scathing retort, Dumbledore

took control of the meeting once more by clearing his throat.

“Ahem,” the old man began, “The next topic I would like to discuss is your Occlumency lessons. While it is apparent that Voldemort has blocked his connection to you after losing Nagini, it is imperative that you shield your mind from him. I suggest that you continue your lessons with Severus.”

“No.” Harry said firmly.

“No?” Asked the Headmaster. “But Harry-” He began only to be cut off by the teenager.

“No. I worked with Kingsley for the past month on it and he said that I am at a point where I can continue on my own for a while. That's precisely what I'll do. I will not allow Professor Snape free access to my mind any more.”

“Now, Harry.” Said Dumbledore patronizingly, “Severus' methods may have been severe, but he is a master Occlumens.”

Harry snorted, saying, “Yeah, and he's a Potions Master, too. Doesn't mean he isn't shit at teaching that, as well.” The teenager delighted in seeing said Potions Master's face turn scarlet, though he was properly chastised when McGonagall snapped at him for his language. “Sorry,” he muttered in apology.

“I really must insist, Harry. Keeping your mind closed is too important to risk not having proper lesson.” Stated Dumbledore.

“If it was that important, Headmaster, then you should have taught me yourself. But, no matter. Why don't you test my shields to see for yourself, that I'm no longer an open book,” challenged Harry.

Dumbledore paused for a moment, before saying, “Very well.” Then whipping out his wand in a flash and incanting Legilimens. There was a brief moment where neither wizard moved, before they both relaxed. The Headmaster nodded thoughtfully before replying. “Yes, you do

have an excellent start, Harry. You can continue as you are, so long as you submit to bi-weekly checks.”

Harry nodded at the stipulation, before signaling for the next topic. The old man shifted gears once more and said, “I would like to discuss your defense club.”

The younger wizard responded, “We will be continuing to meet. I know that you believe Professor Snape to be an adequate teacher, but this is war, and I want my friends prepared.”

“Excellent, I am willing to sanction this club if you open it up to more students and accept a teaching sponsor. I suggest Severus, as he is the current Defense teacher.”

Harry replied to the Headmaster, “I'll meet with the original club members this week and see what they think, though I wouldn't get my hopes up about having Snape sponsor us. Sanctioned or not, we will be meeting, sir.”

Snape sneered once more. “That's Professor Snape, boy. And we know about the come-and-go room. If you don't submit to the Headmaster, you won't meet. It's that simple.”

Harry leveled a hard gaze at the sneering man, “Don't worry, sir. I'll find a way.”

McGonagall finally lost her patience and snapped, “Enough of this useless bickering. If the club doesn't agree to Professor Snape, I will gladly sponsor them, Albus.”

“Thank you, Professor McGonagall,” said Harry.

“Very well, then, since it is quite late, you should be off to bed, Harry.” Said the Headmaster.

“Actually, sir. I have one more item.” Replied Harry, not moving from his seat.

“And that is?” Asked Dumbledore.

Harry spoke evenly, not showing any anger, "Daphne asked me over the summer about fan mail. Seeing as I'm some sort of celebrity, " Harry drawled the word in a perfect imitation of Snape from first year, "shouldn't I have been receiving fan mail? Also, she asked me about Marriage Contracts, now that I'm of age to receive them."

"Ah, yes." Replied the old man calmly. "I had completely forgotten about those. We have a room on the seventh floor where all of your fan mail and such has been diverted. There are four elves that work on sorting the mail. Toys and such have been placed in one pile, money in another, a new pile has been started with Marriage Contracts, and any dangerous items have been forwarded to the Aurors. I can have one of the elves show you to the room at your convenience."

Not seeing any reason to vent his anger at having his mail diverted without his knowledge, at least for the moment, Harry simply nodded said, "Thank you. Goodnight, Professors," and left the office, heading to the Room of Requirement.

The exhausted young wizard opened the door that had been created to find five witches all sitting on a couch facing the door, fast asleep. Harry closed his and concentrated, asking the room to turn the couch into a large, comfortable bed. Once his girls were all laying down, Harry conjured a large blanket to lay across them. Once the girls were taken care of, he created another bedroom, walked in and collapsed onto the bed inside. The next day, classes would start and, he was sure, so would a whole new adventure.

Chapter 12:

Tracey found that she was the last person to wake the next morning, though none of the other girls had moved from the bed. She sat up and looked at her friends and lovers and said, "You know, every time we move into a new place with Harry, the five of us always end up in the same bed together. Think he's hinting at something?"

"It would be a better plan if he ended up in bed with us." Said Luna, no one could tell if she was joking or not.

The almost awkward silence was interrupted when the man in question came out of a second door that hadn't been there the night before. He was wearing his work-out clothes and was near dripping with sweat. Harry noticed that the girls were up, smiled and said, "Good morning, ladies, I hope you slept well. We have about an hour before breakfast. Why don't you all get showered and dressed? Just imagine a bathroom appearing and it will." He finished as he slipped back into the bedroom he had slept in last night.

The girls all closed their eyes and five more doors appeared along the walls. Unknowingly quoting Harry, the each said at the same time, "I love magic."

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Freshly showered and dressed, the teens made their way to the Great Hall. They were deep in discussion.

"I don't like it." Said Harry.

"I know you don't, but you just have to live with it for this meal." Replied Hermione, as she reached down to squeeze Harry's hand reassuringly.

"The three of us," Daphne said from the other side of Hermione, indicating herself, Blaise and Tracey, "need to sit at the Slytherin table this morning, so we can get our schedules with as little hassle as possible."

Luna cut in next. "I need to get my schedule from Professor Flitwick as well. You wouldn't make us give up our houses because we're your consorts, would you?"

Defeated, Harry sighed and grumbled, "No, you're right. Doesn't mean I have to like it, though."

The group entered the mostly empty Great Hall and split to their respective house tables. As always on the first day of classes, Hermione insisted that they sit as near the head table as possible, so they could get their schedules sooner. Luna sat in the middle of the table, but was still ignored by most of her house mates, only the DA members said hello.

The Slytherins left the other girls alone, since they each had a dangerous look in their eyes and their wands on the table. Even Malfoy had enough sense to leave them alone. At least for now.

The comfortable silence that had settled between Harry and Hermione as they ate their breakfasts was broken when Ron all but threw himself down in the seat next to Harry.

"Where were you two last night?" The redhead asked as he shoveled enough food on his plate to feed three.

Harry met Hermione's eye and raised a questioning eyebrow. The girl mimicked his expression, wordlessly querying what he was asking about. The boy put an unsure look on his face and jerked his head at Ron. As an answer, Hermione rolled her eyes and shrugged her shoulders unconcernedly before going back to her meal.

The bushy haired girl looked up after a few bites to find Harry still staring at her. She sighed and waved her hand in a "go on" motion. Giving his best friend a small thankful smile, he turned back to Ron, whose attention had been diverted by the arrival of the rest of the sixth year Gryffindors and his sister.

"I'm not going to be staying in the dorms this year," said Harry, bringing all of the attention at their end of the table to him. "Hermione helped me find an obscure rule in Hogwarts: A History that would let

me get Daphne, Tracey, and Blaise out of the Slytherin dorms. Hermione and Luna will be staying with me, as well.”

Lavender spoke from her seat next to Ron, “Ginny explained about what you're doing with the Untouchables, Harry, but why would Hermione and Lovegood stay with you?”

Ron, whose ears had been reddening since Harry started his explanation, opened his mouth to give a scathing retort on Hermione's sexuality and was cut off by a quickly cast *Silencio*. Ginny spoke as she tucked her wand away, “Yes, Ron, we know what you think of the 'Slimy Snakes.' Have you even given them a chance?”

Ron's response was to cross his arms and glower at his sister.

“I don't know what you're grumbling over, Ron,” Neville cut in, “they seemed perfectly nice on the train yesterday.”

Parvati leaned in from her spot between Lavender and Seamus, “Pad is always telling me that those three are the exception to the 'Git Slytherin' rule.”

Any more discussion was interrupted by a woosh and the fluttering of hundreds of wings. Hedwig soared in and landed on Harry's shoulder, though she carried no letter. “Just came by for a visit, girl?” The boy asked his owl as he fed some bacon from his plate. The owl clicked her beak and bumped her head against Harry's cheek.

While Harry was communicating with his owl, Hermione had received her copy of the Daily Prophet. She unfolded it and read as those surrounding her ate their breakfasts. Moving his attention from Hedwig, Harry asked, “Anything interesting today?”

The brunette nodded her head and said, “There were three more attacks last night. No survivors.” A solemn silence fell over the table before a now un-silenced Ron asked, “Anyone we know?”

Hermione's patience with the redhead, which was admittedly short on a good day, snapped as she snarled at him, “Not that it matters, but no. No one we know was involved, you insensitive berk!” Hedwig

hopped from Harry's shoulder, flapped once or twice and landed on the irate brunette's shoulder. The owl nibbled on the girl's ear in a gesture that calmed the witch. "Thanks, Hedwig," said Hermione as she stroked the snowy owl's feathers.

"Anything else?" Asked Neville, trying to change the subject. Hermione rolled her eyes and tossed the paper onto the table. "Just inane propaganda about how well the Ministry is doing. Even though they aren't really doing anything."

Professor McGonagall arrived, then, with the lists of classes so the students could make their selections. She handed out the pieces of parchment instructing, "Mark down the classes you wish to take this year. I will return once I have handed out the schedules for the other years."

"What electives are you taking, Harry?" Ron asked as he marked down the classes he thought would be easiest.

"Just Care," replied Harry as he watched their Head of House return from handing out the other schedules. The students would hand her their requests and she would compare those to the OWL score the child had received. She would then approve or deny the request and set the schedule by tapping her wand on the parchment, then hand the completed schedule back.

When she was reviewing Harry's selections, she paused, then looked down at the boy with pursed lips, "I know that your relationship with Professor Snape is not...ideal -" The Gryffindors near the Professor all tried, unsuccessfully, to stifle their laughter at this.

Harry, smiling, replied, "Very tactful choice of words, Professor. Ten points to Gryffindor."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter," the teacher said wryly. "As I was saying, I'm afraid you must take Defense Against the Dark Arts. The Headmaster has made the class mandatory for all students."

Harry smiled and said brightly, "That's okay, Professor. I have a note!" He pulled out his NEWT letter form Madam Marchbanks and

handed it to the doubtful Professor. Her eyes widened as she read the letter. Finally, after a long minute of the Transfiguration teacher staring mutely at Harry, she said, "Very well, Mr. Potter. This note is quite acceptable, congratulations. Come to me if Professor Snape gives you problems."

Harry cut in, smirking, "So, I'll see you later, then?"

McGonagall just raised an eyebrow at the boy before turning to Ron, "Mr. Weasley, don't forget you need to book the Quidditch Pitch for team try-outs."

"Yes, Professor." Answered Ron. "Now," The teacher continued, "off with you all, before you are late for your first class."

As the group left the Great Hall, Hermione looked at her schedule and said, "We've got Defense with the Slytherins first. I wonder what class will be like this year. Even with Professor Snape teaching, it ought to be better than Umbridge, the toad." Harry nodded his agreement.

"Why do we have to start the year with Snape and the Snakes?" Grumbled Ron.

"I assure you, Weasley." Cut in Daphne, as the Untouchables met up with Harry and Hermione, "it gives us no pleasure to see Snape's ugly beak bright and early on a Monday morning, either."

"B-b-but you're Slytherins! He's your Head of House!" Exclaimed a surprised and flabbergasted Ron.

"That doesn't mean they have to like him, Ronald," said Luna as she joined the growing number of students halfway to the Gryffindor dorms. Harry shot her a questioning look as she sidled up to him and grabbed his arm as she had on the way to King's Cross. This would quickly become the standard action for when Luna was walking with Harry. The boy still tensed at first, but that reaction would wear down over time. "I've got Herbology with Ginny." Was Luna's answer to Harry's look.

The green eyed Gryffindor waited with his consorts outside of the common room while the others went inside and retrieved their books and supplies for the day. Each of Harry's group had all of their necessary class materials packed into the special bags that Harry had bought at Diagon Alley.

Luna and Ginny split off from the group as the Sixth years headed off to their first class of the year. As they approached the Defense classroom, they saw the Slytherin sixth years already gathered in front of the closed door. A tense silence reigned between the two sets of students in the minutes before class.

Harry broke the silence by saying, "Well, I'll see you lot after class. I'm off to the library." Hermione beamed a proud smile at the statement while Ron groaned. "It's the first day! First lesson, even, Harry! What could you possibly have to do in the library?"

Harry looked at the redhead as if he were a bit dim and said, "Research. I've not got time to slack off this year." With that, he waved to his other friends and started to walk away, only to be stopped by the sound of Malfoy's hated voice.

"What's the matter Scarhead?" the blonde boy asked, "Did you fail the OWL so badly that you couldn't make it into a mandatory class? You must have done truly awful, even the squib, there, made it into the class." The Slytherin sycophants all laughed at Neville's reddening face.

Harry just smirked and said, "Neville's more than capable of whipping any of you lot. I'd trust him at my back any day." The Longbottom heir stood taller and the redness of his anger left his face at the compliment from Harry.

Malfoy snorted, saying, "Capable? I heard the squib squealed like a pig at the Ministry. Just like his dear old dad did all those years ago."

Neville snarled and went to leap at the other boy at the slight against his father. The only thing that saved the youngest Malfoy from a savage beating was Ron, Seamus, and Dean holding the enraged boy back.

“Oh dear,” said Harry in a falsely sympathetic voice. “Been in contact with Bellatrix as well as your convict father? What would Susan's Aunt have to say about that?” The Slytherin bully's face paled a tiny bit. Harry saw this, smirked and continued. “What would happen if a bit of veritaserum made it into a drink during a meal? Why, you'd be singing like a bird! In front of the whole school, no less.”

“Ten points from Gryffindor and another night of detention for threatening a Prefect, Potter.” Professor Snape said silkily from the now open door to the Defense classroom. The man's beetle black eyes swept the rest of the students waiting in the hall before ordering, “Inside. All of you. Now.”

The startled students began filing into the room at Snape's barked order. Harry just waved to his friends and, once again, tuned to head to the library, only to get stopped once more.

“Skipping class on the first day, Potter” Asked the new Defense Professor dangerously. “I'll have to take another fifty points and add two additional weeks of detention.”

“No, sir,” Harry replied confidently. “I'm not skipping. I'm not enrolled in your class this year, so your punishments are invalid. I would think you'd be jumping with joy to be rid of me.”

The Professor ignored the last comment, saying, “Impossible. The Headmaster has decreed that Defense is mandatory for all students. Especially NEWT level students, such as yourself.”

“Why would I take a NEWT level course for a subject I've already passed the NEWT for?” Harry asked, thoroughly enjoying himself.

“Using your fame to get what you want again, Potter? Arrogant, just like your father, as always. Or, perhaps you simply bribed someone to get your NEWT.” The Professor taunted smoothly.

“Madam Bones and Madam Marchbanks asked that I go to the Ministry for a demonstration.” Harry replied through gritted teeth. Nothing could set the boy on edge like the sneering Professor could.

"I had no idea it was my NEWT test." The younger wizard smirked smugly and once again pulled his, now, well read letter and held it out to the older man, who snatched it quickly out of Harry's fingers.

The Potter scion couldn't help but to needle the older man more. "Besides, isn't it your buddy Lucius' style to bribe people to get what he want? It certainly isn't mine."

Professor Snape snarled, crumpled the letter and threw it back in Harry's face. "Fine. Be back here tonight at eight o'clock for your detention. We'll see if you truly earned that NEWT." With a swirl of his robes, the teacher turned and entered his classroom, slamming the door behind him.

Harry winced when he realized he wound the vindictive Professor up for his friends. "Sorry guys." He said to the door and made his way to the library.

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The students who were taking Defense Against the Dark Arts sat silently in the classroom that was lit, dimly, by candles that lined the wall, sitting between windows that had the shutters pulled shut. Startled gasps sounded in the quiet room when the door slammed shut. Snape paused momentarily before sweeping down the aisle to the front of the room. His robes billowing behind him.

"NEWT level Defense Against the Dark Arts. In this class you will learn about true darkness. Hexes designed to destroy a man completely. Curses so vile that they would have you begging for the Cruciatus curse. Creatures so evil that their only joy comes from the pain and death of the innocent. I will teach you the darkness that resides in the heart of all of us, and how to fight it."

The Professor paused, letting his message settle in, then began again. "All spellwork in this class will be done non-verbally, or no credit will be given. All work assigned for outside of class will be handed in on time and complete, or no credit will be given. The first task for you to accomplish is casting the Protego shield non-verbally. I will put you into pairs. One of the pair shall conjure the shield

without speaking, the other will test the shield with a simple stinging hex. The stinging hex may be verbal. Then you will switch on my signal.”

The Gryffindors looked very wary at this, knowing Snape's penchant for ignoring the misdeeds of his own house. The Slytherins, on the other hand, grinned at each other.

“The pairs shall be as follows,” said the Professor as he all-but glided up and down the aisles between desks. “Nott and Greengrass, Goyle and Zabini, Crabbe and Dav-” Snape stopped himself mid-word, then glared at Tracey malevolently, and evilly joyful look in his eye. “I must apologize, Ms. Marie,” Tracey was fuming as she rose to stand opposite the large teen. The teacher continued, “Finnegan and Thomas, Weasley and Longbottom, Brown and Bulstrode, Patil and Parkinson, and Malfoy and Granger. Line up and begin.”

The members of Umbridge's former Inquisitorial Squad stood with Dean, Ron, and Theodore Nott lined up on the side of the attackers, while the others stood across from them, preparing to be fired upon. Wands raised in preparation and Malfoy's eyes danced in anticipation of hexing the uppity mudblood across from him.

As one, eight stinging hexes launched across the room followed by four squawks of pain. Harry had taught Hermione, Tracey, Daphne, and Blaise how to cast non-verbally after he had learned himself. They were not perfect, but they each were good enough to raise a shield on the first day.

“Marie, Greengrass, and Zabini; ten points to Slytherin, each. The rest of you, continue.” Hisses and grunts of pain could be heard after spoken incantations for stinging hexes as the class continued. Malfoy was firing as many stinging hexes as hard and as fast as he could, to no effect. Hermione stood and smirked as should stood casually, perfectly protected.

Finally, after thirty minutes of sneering at the incompetency of Gryffindors, but not correcting any mistakes, the Professor called time to switch. Dangerous gleams could be seen of the eyes of those who

had just suffered through half an hour of constant stings. Revenge would be both swift and sweet.

Of the new defenders, only Malfoy and Nott were able to erect any kind of shield non-verbally on the first try, earning another twenty points for Slytherin. Nott's shield fell at the first hit of contact from Daphne's hex. The blonde Slytherin boy's shield faltered greatly and let some of the hex through, but did not disappear entirely when it was hit by Hermione's non-verbal hex.

"Granger," snarled Snape, "clearly you are not as smart as you claim to be, since you can not follow a simple direction. The attacks are meant to be verbalized. Twenty points from Gryffindor. Now, continue."

Ron looked like he was about to open his mouth to defend Hermione, but the girl caught his eye and shook her head no. The redhead looked like he would speak anyway, but finally acquiesced and kept his mouth shut. The class continued for another half hour as they had the first. Malfoy's shield fell during the next attack and, like Nott, was completely unable to re-cast it.

Finally, the class was over and the students were sent on their way with a parting gift of two rolls of parchment on the importance of non-verbal casting. Grumbling and rubbing the spots where he had been hit by Neville, Ron looked up as he exited the room and saw Harry standing outside the door. "How was class, Ron?" The green-eyed wizard asked.

"Bloody non-verbal casting will be the death of me." Said Ron.

Harry replied, "Don't worry, we'll cover it in the DA. I'll make sure you and everyone gets a good handle on it. What've you got now?"

"Free period," answered Ron, liking that he was still able to talk to Harry. The past month estranged from his friends had been hard on the boy. Owling Lavender had been a large help, though he hadn't asked her out yet, he was planning on it. "I'm gonna head down to the pitch, see if I can't catch Madam Hooch to book our try-outs. I'm going to have everyone try out again, make sure we've got the best

team possible. I'll see you later." With that, the redhead turned and marched off to his next destination.

Harry's consorts had witnessed most of the discussion between the two boys. They had noticed the strain there, but they also recognized the longing in Harry to connect with his friend again. "Why are you trying so hard with him?" Asked Blaise, as the group headed to the dungeons for their first Potions class and she latched onto his right arm.

"Ron was the very first friend I ever had, besides Hedwig, and I guess Hagrid. Even though we've had our fights, he's still been like a brother to me. I guess I'm not ready to let that go. Sure, he has his faults; his quick temper and his tendency to speak at first reaction, but I have mine, too; I'm selfish and moody, among other things. I'm hoping that, given enough time to think about it and letting him get to see the real you, he'll come around. I'd still trust him to have my back in any fight."

Hermione, who had laid her hand on Harry's left shoulder, squeezed it and said, "That's very mature of you, Harry. I find myself unwilling to give up on Ron's friendship as well, but this time he really does need to apologize for the things he said. I don't think Molly actually apologized, either. I know you had that chat with her, but the proof will be in the pudding."

"So, the plan is to act like nothing happened?" Asked Tracey a little incredulously.

"For now." The boy replied. "We're not ready for that conversation yet. I'm hoping he'll come around once he gets to know you all. Not your masks, the real you. I know that you each keep an amazing person hidden away from the general public."

Blaise searched Harry's eyes for any sign of deceit or sarcasm. Finding none, the dark haired girl blushed lightly and leaned into the boy, hugging the arm she was holding.

Harry stiffened a moment before relaxing, then he perked up and asked, "So, what do we know about this Slughorn fellow?"

Daphne, who was walking behind Harry, reached out and squeezed his shoulder as she answered, "He was the Potions master and Slytherin Head of House before Snape. Actually, I'm pretty sure he taught Snape. I don't know how long his tenure was before, but he has a reputation as a collector."

"Collector?" Hermione asked.

"He has a club that he runs called the 'Slug Club.'" Replied Daphne. "Basically, he tries to gain favor with the students who he thinks will be most successful later in life, so that he can ride on their coat tails."

Harry groaned as his shoulders slumped. "Sorry, Harry. I'll bet he'll be buttering you up from the moment you step into that classroom." Said Daphne, softly, as they approached the open door to the classroom.

The Potions classroom itself remained largely unchanged, though it was lit better. Cauldrons bubbled and boiled over flames along the walls and tables with chairs in groups of three were scattered about the room. The students in the class were from all of the houses. Hannah Abbot and Justin Finch-Fletchley were the only students to take the class from Hufflepuff house, while all of the Slytherins and Ravenclaws were there, bar Crabbe, Goyle, and Millicent Bulstrode. Harry and Hermione were the only Gryffindors in the room.

Harry and Hermione sat at the front of the class with an extra seat next to Hermione as the students sat mostly by house. Daphne, Tracey, and Blaise sat directly behind the two Gryffindors. Padma walked to the front of the class and asked the two quietly, "Hello Harry, Hermione, mind if I sit with you?"

Hermione smiled and nodded, while Harry said, "Sure, Padma, take a seat," indicating the chair next to him. They didn't have any more time to chat as the large, walrus-looking man entered the room and began his lecture.

"Welcome to NEWT level Potions. I am your new Potions Professor Horace Slughorn. Let me start by calling roll." The large man started with Abbot, Hannah and worked his way down the list, making the

odd comment here or there about teaching so-and-so's parents. Harry's stomach fell as the Professor's eyes lit up like a lumos spell when he read Potter, Harry.

"Oho! It's quite a pleasure to meet you, my boy." Said the Professor, jovially. Hermione and Padma both could hear Harry's teeth grinding together and knew that it was because he hated being called "boy." "I'm expecting big things from you this year. I taught your mother, and she was the by far the best student I have ever had. She would have been a sure-fire Potions Mistress if it weren't for that nasty bit of business with You-Know-Who."

Hermione poked Harry in the side to get him to relax his jaw, for fear he'd crack all of his teeth. "I'll see what I can do, Professor." Said Harry grumpily.

"Excellent, excellent. Now, we will be brewing some very difficult and dangerous potions this year; Draught of Living Death. Draught of Peace, Amortentia, Blood Replenishing Potion. All very important potions to be able to recognize and understand."

The class quickly understood why Professor Slughorn had such a long career teaching Potions before. The man was an excellent teacher, even if he was a bit fixated on Harry. To the Ravenclaws, Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors it was a revelation. They were actually taught proper technique and were rewarded for correct answers and well-made potions. The Slytherins, though, looked a bit mutinous that they were no longer the rulers of the classroom.

Malfoy had oddly kept quiet throughout the class. He diligently did his work, brewing the potion near perfectly. The blonde boy was studying the new Professor, though. He wanted to know what his limits would be. If the walrus was going to be doting over Potter, then Draco would have to be cautious in his torment of the so-called savior.

The class ended and Harry was out the door before the blubbery Professor could ask him to stay behind. The young man waited outside the room for his companions, Tracey and Daphne each took an arm this time, and they all headed to lunch in companionable silence.

Because the dynamic between Harry and the girls was so new to the school that they drew a great many stares and sparked quite a few whispered conversations. Harry had experienced this off and on over the past five years, so the actions of his fellow students didn't really bother him anymore. At least, he never let it show. Hermione was also used to the situation, having been by Harry's side through his ordeals, though she still found it disconcerting. Daphne, Tracey, Blaise, and Luna, who was currently waiting at the entrance to the Great Hall for the sixth years to arrive, were especially troubled by the attention. They had spent their entire Hogwarts careers trying to avoid the spotlight that they were suddenly thrust into. The girls all hid their reticence well, though Hermione could tell how upsetting the situation was to them.

Finally entering the Great Hall, the group headed towards the Gryffindor table where Ron was eating with his sister. The redheaded boy's ears were pink, but he had a thoughtful look on his face in response to something Ginny had said.

Harry slid into the seat next to his male friend, Hermione and Daphne sat on the other side of Harry while Blaise and Tracey sat next to Luna and Ginny, who had a spot saved for Dean.

"How were your classes so far Ginny, Luna?" Asked Hermione kindly.

"There were fine," said Ginny. "Though I can already tell we'll be swamped with work."

"What classes did you have this morning?" Queried Daphne.

"Herbology and Transfiguration. I've got History of Magic after lunch." Replied Ginny as Dean sat down next to her, his robes somewhat singed and smoking.

"What in Merlin's name happened to you?" Asked Ron.

Dean rolled his eyes as he answered, "Seamus thought it would be funny to slip Neville a new Wheeze. Torching Tamale."

The group attempted to hold in their laughter as they watched a singed, smoking, and red-faced Neville walk over to Hannah at the Hufflepuff table.

“Seamus didn't think it was as funny when Neville lit his bed on fire.” Continued Dean, causing the others to lose their hold and burst out into raucous laughter. After they had calmed and eaten a bit, Harry turned to Ron and asked. “Were you able to book the pitch?”

“Yep.” Said the redhead excitedly, “Tryouts are Friday after dinner. I'm going to post the announcement in the common room later today.”

“I'm thinking of trying out this year,” said Dean. “Beater or Chaser, maybe I'll tryout for both and see how I do.”

“Brilliant!” Exclaimed Harry, then winced. “D'you think you could run tryouts for Seeker first, Ron? I've got detention with Snape every night at eight o'clock for two weeks.”

Ron winced sympathetically before nodding and saying, “Sure thing, Harry. Hopefully we'll be able to wrap up the whole thing before then, anyway.”

After they finished eating, the group split and headed to their first afternoon classes. Dean, Harry, and Ron made their way outside, to Hagrid's hut. The boys all talked Quidditch excitedly on their way, only stopping when Hagrid's voice boomed out at them. “Ello 'Arry! Glad ter see ye. Got some really int'restin' creatures this year. Good ter see you, too, Ron. No Hermione this term?”

Harry shook his head and said, “No, she told me to tell you, though, she's really sorry, but Arithmancy is scheduled at the same time and she had to take that if she's going to go into spell-creation like she wants.”

Hagrid beamed the smile of a proud parent. “Well, tha's jes' our 'ermione innit? Brightest witch of her age, no doubt.” Harry smiled back at the half-giant, completely agreeing with the large man.

The Care teacher looked around and saw that the rest of the class had collected. "As you well know, this is NEWT-level Care of Magical Creatures. NEWT-level means that we get ter look at all the really int'resting animals." The large man said with a beaming smile behind his bushy beard. The students shared a look of trepidation with each other. They all knew that, to Hagrid, "interesting" meant "terrifying" and "deadly" to everyone else."

The half-giant began his lesson, in a kindly lecturing voice, "The first creature I'm gonna teach yer abou' is considered a dark creature. I don't have an example ter show ye since it would be too dangerous. So, we'll jes' have ter use the book. The Basilisk is considered the King of the Serpents. It's born from a chicken's egg, hatched beneath a toad. It's very tough, not much can harm a Basilisk, though there is one sure-fire way to kill one. Can anyone tell me what it is?"

For the first time, ever, Ron was the first to raise his hand in a glance. When he was called on, the redhead grinned like a monkey and said, "Send Harry after it."

Harry groaned, rolled his eyes, and ducked his head as the class broke out into a mixture of laughter and excited whispers. "Tha's righ" exclaimed Hagrid, "I fergot you did that, Harry! Come up and tell us about the Basilisk."

The boy stood and went to stand in front of the class, he shuffled his feet and said, "Erm, alright. The Basilisk I fought was about a thousand years old. It was pretty large. It's sight didn't kill me because Fawkes, the Headmaster's phoenix came and poked it's eyes out. He also dropped a sword for me. After a bit of a scuffle, when it tried to strike me, I stuck the sword through the top of its head. A fang got me in the arm, here." At this Harry rubbed his elbow, where he still had a scar. "But Fawkes cried on it and healed it before the venom could kill me. Still bloody hurt, though."

The class was silent in awe and a little disbelief. So, Harry shrugged and went back to standing between Ron and Neville. Hagrid came out of his stupor next, "Excellent. Thank you Harry. Thirty points to Gryffindor. I want a roll of parchment on the Basilisk due next Monday."

The rest of the class remained fairly tame. It was a review of the previous years, though none of the animals were there. Harry and Ron were done for the day when class ended. The boys headed back to Gryffindor common room so that the redhead could put up the notice about Quidditch tryouts. Once there, the boy-who-lived learned the meaning of the phrase “old habits die hard” when he agreed to play a quick game of chess with Ron.

One game turned into three and soon it was time for Dinner. The last meal of the day passed quickly and with little consequence. Harry and his girls called for Dobby and followed him to the room where all of Harry's re-routed correspondence was being stored.

The six students goggled at the piles of clothes, toys, galleons and pieces of parchment. Harry asked, “Erm, what am I supposed to do with all of this? I mean, these are baby clothes and toys!”

“I don't know, Harry,” shrugged Tracey with a teasing glint to her eye. “Some of those clothes would look pretty cute on you. Especially this pink one with the little ducky on it.”

“Thanks.” said the boy, dryly. “I don't know, are there any wizarding orphanages or anything like that?”

“There are,” replied Daphne, approvingly. “Three or four, I think.”

“Fine,” said Harry. “Dobby, could you split all of this up equally between the orphanages and deliver it all? Except for the letters, of course.”

“Yes, Harry Potter, sir. Dobby can be doing.” The elf replied, eagerly bouncing on his feet at the prospect of more work.

The girls spent the next several hours before Harry's detention helping him go through the letters that had gathered over the past fifteen years. They all had good laughs when they found poorly spelled letters from their classmates to Harry. The proposed marriage contracts that Harry had dreaded finding ever since Daphne had brought them up were stacked in a pile separate from the rest of the

letters. Harry just stood and stared at the pile. "I don't think I'm ready to open any of those, yet. I'll work on that tomorrow afternoon." He said with a slight shudder.

"You don't have time, anyway." Replied Hermione from just behind the wizard. "You've got your detention with Professor Snape in fifteen minutes. You'd better leave now if you don't want to be late."

The wizard glanced at his watch, cursed, then ran out of the room and down the hall, shouting his thanks and good nights to the girls as he left. He reached the Defense classroom with five minutes to spare and not winded at all. The young man took a moment to compose himself before opening the door, before dropping to the floor to avoid a curse that was sent at his head.

"Time for your exam, Potter." Sneered Snape as he fired at the prone teen. Harry rolled out of the way and hopped to his feet, pulling his wand on the way. The next curse was batted away and the two wizards stood facing each other, wands pointed at the other's heart.

"I see that you're going to give me the Moody test." Said Harry, calmly, though he had forgotten about Snape "testing" him. Surveying his surroundings, the room had been cleared of most of the desks, there were still two or three scattered about. Snape stood directly opposite the door, which was to Harry's right, now. The room was dark, lit by half the candles that lined the wall. The teacher began taunting the student, standard insults about his fame and his father.

The boy let the words slide over him without reacting. He was trying to decide how much to show the bitter man. Thought Professor Dumbledore trusted the newest Defense instructor, Harry didn't, and the boy thought that it wouldn't do for Snape to let Voldemort know how much his rival had learned.

What took place over the next half hour for Harry was a lesson in patience, frustration, and pain. The younger wizard always kept himself held back, dodging the more powerful curses, blocking the medium level and "missing" the lower level curses, letting them hit him.

While the younger wizard knew he wasn't trying as hard as he could, he still knew that if he were to face the Professor for real, he would have a hard time of it, not even sure that he would win. The older man was effortless in his defense and attacks, barely breaking a sweat.

Finally, Snape called for a halt and Harry fell to a knee. The student was tired, sweaty, and bleeding lightly from several places. There were scorch marks and rubble all over the classroom, making it look like a disaster area. His breath caught, Harry stood and looked to the Professor, waiting for the verbal abuse that was to come. Harry knew it was coming, so he was able to control his emotions through the new form of attack. He didn't have to wait long. "A performance like that lends credence to the thought that you paid for your NEWT. For the rest of your detention, clean up this room, without magic." A flick of the wand and a bucket filled with water and a scrub brush appeared in the room. Snape turned with a swirl of his robes and left the room.

Defeated, Harry knelt and grabbed the brush and started scrubbing. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter 13:

The only class that had to be divided by Houses for the sixth years was Defense Against the Dark Arts because the Headmaster had made the class mandatory. The rest of the subjects were held all together because not every student took each class. While NEWT Potions had the smallest number, NEWT Charms and NEWT Transfiguration had the most.

A more remedial class was offered to those students who did not reach the desired OWL score to allow them into the NEWT-level class. This thinned the so-called herd somewhat, but the classroom was nonetheless filled when Harry entered the Transfiguration classroom Tuesday morning. This meant that Professor McGonagall would need to be more stern during her lessons. In a class that size, several small distractions could become a large one very quickly.

All of the students could see this on the Gryffindor Head's face when they entered the classroom. As such, the seats in the rear of the classroom filled up first. This suited Hermione just fine as she pulled Harry down to the desk that sat front and center. The teacher stood quietly and motionlessly until the exact minute that class started, then she began teaching.

For the first time he could remember, Harry was just as interested in Transfiguration as Hermione. He wanted to see how well the tips and notes his father had written about actually worked when applied in class. McGonagall gave the standard greeting of the NEWT classes, detailing some of what would be taught that year, how challenging it would be and how much they needed to keep on top of their work. She detailed that they would be taught Human to Animal Transfiguration, conjuring, and the theory behind the Animagus transformation but not the practice.

Professor McGonagall finished her introduction by saying, "As Professor Snape has most likely told you, your classwork this year will be done silently. To aid you in this task, we will start today with a bit of review. Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, Miss Bones, would you three please pass out the match sticks sitting on my desk? Thank you," she said as the students did as she requested. The teacher continued her

lesson, "Your task will be to turn these matchsticks into needles, just as you did in first year, but you are to do it silently. You may begin when ready."

The final order had been given as soon as the three helpers were back in their seats with matchsticks of their own. Harry and Hermione, unintentionally, moved in perfect synchronization as they pulled their wands and tapped their matchsticks once, transfiguring them into perfect needles. All without making a sound. McGonagall was impressed with their work and told them so, "Well done. Take five points for Gryffindor each."

What followed for the rest of the class was a symphony of grunting and straining noises as the rest of the students attempted the task. Daphne, Blaise, and Tracey each earned five points for Slytherin shortly after Harry and Hermione. The Professor flowed around the classroom helping students as she went.

"Silent, Miss Parkinson, not whispered."

"Don't try to push your magic, Mr. Thomas, let it flow."

"Breathe, Mr. Boot, breathe!"

Finally, the class was sent on its way with homework to work on the five previous year's lessons silently. A majority of the class made their way to Professor Flitwick's room for NEWT Charms. They were joined by Neville, Ron, and Seamus who were coming from a post breakfast nap.

"I love all the down time we have this year!" Exclaimed Ron.

"You should be using it for studying, Ron." Retorted Hermione, "NEWTs are too important to put off studying until the last minute like every other year."

"Blimey, Hermione," Ron said as he rolled his eyes, "it's the second day! What could I possibly have to work on?"

“Erm,” cut in Neville, “we do have that essay for Professor Snape due tomorrow.” The redhead rolled his eyes and waved off the other boy's logic as they walked into the classroom and took their seats.

“Welcome, Welcome!” Cried Professor Flitwick from the top of the pile of books behind the podium at the front of the class. The diminutive teacher was able to bring all attention to himself with just those two words. While his two colleagues, Professors McGonagall and Snape, used strictness and intimidation, respectively, as their teaching styles, Flitwick was able to hold the attention of the class through his excitement to share knowledge.

He continued, “I'm not going to bore you with the standard NEWT-level class speech. I'm also not going to test your silent-casting abilities with prior year's work. That is something you'll need to practice on your own, though you can always come to me for help. We are going to cover a wide range of Charms this year and next. This year, though, we will focus on communication charms, mood-altering charms, glamour charms, wards and protection charms, and finally, the Patronus Charm.”

The DA members who were attending the class all smiled slightly to themselves as they had begun learning about the Patronus the year before, from Harry.

After a short pause, Flitwick began again, “Normally, the Patronus is covered in your Defense Against the Dark Arts class, but with the Dementors defecting from Azkaban, we decided to cover it here, first, to give Professor Snape ample time to cover other Defensive measures.”

Even though Harry already knew a great deal about the topic being discussed, his attention remained firmly on the tiny teacher as the man spoke enthusiastically, “There are four stages to the Patronus Charm. The first is a silvery mist that comes from the wand. When facing a dementor, this mist will make the creature pause for a moment, but not much else. That moment, though, could be enough of a distraction for a witch or wizard to get away.

“The next stage is the shield; the mist will form into a cone shape and is effective at holding off a single dementor for a short time, though not for very long. It will completely fail if there is more than one. After the mist shield comes a blurry, distorted, non-corporeal shape. This can block about two weak dementors and is what will form the corporeal Patronus shape of the final stage. I wouldn't expect many of you to reach this stage this year.”

Harry smirked to himself at this. About half of the, now, sixth year DA members had achieved the third stage. Daphne, Blaise, and Tracey were also at this stage and were very close to gaining their fully corporeal Patronus forms. The teen wizard had worked with the girls very hard at this over the summer during their Sunday night training sessions.

Not noticing the look on Harry's face, or ignoring it, Flitwick continued, “The final stage is the fully corporeal Patronus. Very few witches and wizards are able to get to this last stage. The Patronus will take the shape of an animal that either defines the caster, or has special meaning to them. Sometimes, but not always, the Animagus form of a witch or wizard will also be the form of their Patronus. Professor McGonagall is a good example of this as her Patronus is also a cat shape. I would be most surprised if more than a few of you were able to conjure a fully corporeal Patronus by the end of next year. A few years after graduation would be a more achievable goal. Now, before we learn the Charm itself, are there any questions so far?”

Padma Patil raised her hand and, when called on, asked, “How many dementors can a stage four Patronus repel?”

“Excellent question!” Exclaimed the Professor as he bounced on his toes, “Five points to Ravenclaw. A Patronus of average power will drive away three to eight dementors. I can repel around twelve, myself, where the Headmaster can repel around fifty. The strongest I have heard of was over one hundred dementors repelled.” He paused for a moment to let that sink in before continuing his lesson, “Now, who knows the incantation for the Patronus Charm?”

The miniature man squeaked in surprise at the number of hands that had been raised to answer the question. “Ms. Bones.”

"Expecto Patronum, sir." Replied Susan.

"Quite right," said the Professor, "take five points for Hufflepuff. How does one get the Patronus Charm to actually work...Ms. Granger?"

Hermione answered, "The Patronus Charm is powered by the happy feelings of the caster. Since the dementors feed off of negative emotions, the memory of feeling must be particularly strong."

"Perfect answer as usual, Ms. Granger, five points for Gryffindor." Praised Flitwick. He continued, looking at Harry, "Would anyone like to attempt this Charm?" Several hands, other than Harry's, raised to volunteer. The boy-who-lived smiled his trademark lopsided grin, wagged his eyebrows twice, then nodded his head towards Neville, who had his hand raised.

The tiny teacher started and said, "Very well, Mr. Longbottom, front and center." Hannah Abbot discretely squeezed the suddenly more nervous boy's hand as he made his way to the front of the class.

Malfoy, unable to keep his mouth shut, exclaimed loudly, "Is the squib actually supposed to do something? Other than stutter, that is."

"Twenty points from Slytherin," snapped the Professor, "and a detention with Mr. Filch." More calmly, he addressed Neville, "Whenever you are ready, Mr. Longbottom."

The young wizard closed his eyes for a moment in concentration before opening them again. Looking first to Harry, who smiled and nodded with a confident smile, then to Hannah, who beamed a beautiful smile, he then raised his wand and called out, "Expecto Patronum!"

Professor Flitwick fell off of his stack of books when a large, silvery, full corporeal grizzly bear leapt out of Neville's wand and into the middle of the room. It looked around a moment, visibly on guard, then faded away after assessing no threats in the room. The class was silent for two heartbeats after the silvery beast had gone before all of

the members of the DA jumped out of their seats to give the shy young man an enthusiastic standing ovation.

Once the tiny teacher had righted himself, he joined in exclaiming, "Spectacular! Simply spectacular! Take thirty points for Gryffindor, Mr. Longbottom. We'll now all practice casting the spell. If you can produce a corporeal Patronus, please help those around you."

Quickly, the room was filled with various animals from Harry's stag to Hermione's Otter. The students who were in the DA the previous year earned a multitude of points for their houses for the progress they showed with the Charm. The students who weren't, namely the Slytherins, quickly became frustrated and settled on glaring at anything that had a silvery glow to it. Any attempt at helping from the other students was met by harsh words and harsher looks.

Finally, when the class was about finished, Professor Flitwick mounted his pile of books and called attention back to himself, saying, "Excellent work, everyone. I think we'll have the highest success rate for this Charm in any year that I've taught. Now, for homework, I would like two rolls of parchment from each of you on the Patronus Charm due in one week. Class dismissed."

Neville received many hearty pats on the backs and hand shakes in congratulations as the teens left the classroom, up until Hannah whispered into his ear with a sexy look on her face. The boy blushed a deep red, then let his girlfriend pull him to an out of the way broom cupboard.

Susan looked at their departing backs and said wryly, "Guess I'm not eating with them, today."

Daphne smirked and said, "Would you really want what she's having?"

"Yeah," said Tracey, "I shouldn't think you would be on a liquid diet."

Harry, who was walking close to the group of girls, choked on a bit of spit and tripped on a piece of air. As he stumbled and coughed, Susan laughed and said saucily, "Oh, I don't know. It would have to

depend on the recipe,” causing Harry to fall flat on his face when she winked at him.

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After lunch, Harry walked outside with Ginny and Luna, who were going to their Care of Magical Creatures class. Since it was still warm out and a beautifully clear day, the young wizard had decided to take his homework to his favorite tree. He learned quickly that he was on the positive side of famous so far this year; most people would flash him a smile or a wave. The girls would mostly giggle and run off when Harry smiled and waved back, simply being polite. Some of the braver students would approach him to say hello, which always led to a bit of awkwardness as Harry still had no idea how to deal with his fame.

As they exited the Entrance Hall, a raspy attempt at a sexy voice stopped the trio in their tracks. “Hello, Harry.”

The wizard turned to find a girl with dark, wavy hair and blue eyes smiling seductively at him. Harry noticed that the girl's Gryffindor colored robes seemed to be a size too small for her. “Er...hi?” said Harry, not noticing Luna rolling her eyes or Ginny snickering quietly behind her hands. The redhead's snickering became full-out giggles when she saw the look on Harry's face. The young man was simultaneously trying to remember the other girl's name and looking as jumpy as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. Ginny let Harry flounder for a few moments before she clued him in, “Harry, this is Romilda Vane, she's in my year in Gryffindor.”

Vane scoffed and said to her dorm mate in a voice that one would use on a particularly dim child, “Ginny, of course Harry knows who I am.”

“Yeah, Ginny,” replied Harry, his voice thick with sarcasm and disbelief, “of course I know the name of someone I've never interacted with before...in any way whatsoever.”

The green eyed wizard's astonishment increased as the dark-haired girl latched onto his arm with a surprisingly vice-like grip and raised

her nose with a look of smug satisfaction spreading across her face. She locked eyes with Luna and said in a, to Romilda, sultry voice, “walk me to class, Harry?”

The young man's eyes lifted upwards, silently asking for whatever powers that controlled the universe to grant him the patience to survive this. As the group began walking to class, Harry shook his arm furiously, trying to dislodge Romilda's hands. After a minute or so, he began pleading with the universal powers to strike either of the two of them down. Preferably her, since she would not stop talking about what her favorite shops in Hogsmeade.

Luna guessed that this was supposed to be a subtle hint that Harry was supposed to ask Romilda on a date to Hogsmeade. The wizard thought that his prayers were answered when there was a sudden flash of white light. He was disappointed when it was just Colin Creevey. “Hiya Harry!” all-but yelled the excited fifth year boy.

“Oh! Colin! Could you take another picture of us? Harry, look at the camera this time.” Interjected Romilda.

Luna and Ginny were not even trying to hold back their laughter anymore. Tears streamed out of their eyes as they leaned on each other, struggling to breathe.

The young, eager to please, blonde boy quickly raised his camera to comply when he caught sight of the angriest green-eyed glare he had ever seen. Slowly, he lowered the camera, saying, “Ah, um...M-maybe some other time...Look! Hagrid's about to start class – bye!”

When Romilda let go of his arm and turned to give him a goodbye kiss, Harry used his finely honed skills of escape to squawk, fall over, and crab-walk away from the crazy girl. He then furiously shook the arm that the girl had been holding yelping, “pins and needles! Pins and needles!”

The dark haired girl angrily stomped her foot and yelled, “Harry Potter! You get over here right now and apologize to me!”

“Ummm-No!” Replied Harry, to the deranged request, over his shoulder as he leapt to his feet and ran away.

Ginny looked at the stalker and said, “Most people would take that as a sign.”

“Oh, that?” Answered Vane, as if nothing had happened, “that's just a game we play. Harry will pretend he doesn't know me for a few weeks, then he'll come back in time to grovel and beg that I take him to Hogsmeade.” She then turned and joined the rest of the OWL Care class.

Luna shook her head and said, “And people called me Loony.” Ginny snorted once and joined the class with her friend.

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Harry, after he jumped into the lake to get the feel and smell of Romilda off of him, because plankton and dead fish smelled better than creepy stalker girls, was sitting under what he considered his tree with Hedwig on his knee and his Charms text in his hands.

“Well girl,” he asked his familiar, “how long do you think I can avoid her?” Hedwig hooted mournfully in response and Harry sighed. “Yeah, I don't think for very long, either.”

A shrug of the shoulders later and the boy dove into his Charms homework, eager to research the Patronus Charm a bit more thoroughly.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Harry sat in the Headmaster's office after dinner that day, waiting for the old man to show up. Dumbledore had sent the young wizard a note, delivered by a first year, requesting his presence after the meal. The green eyed wizard had a bit of smile on his face as he remembered the conversation during the meal. He had been the target of some merciless, but still good-natured, ribbing from his friends. Ginny had seemed to especially enjoy it, until Harry asked

her, rather pointedly, to pass the butter. The redhead's jaw had snapped closed with an audible click.

After a short wait, the Headmaster returned to his office and greeted Harry warmly. The younger wizard was in such high spirits that he indulged the aging man in some friendly conversation. Lemon drops were offered and denied, and the grandfatherly old man asked, "So, Harry, how have your first days of classes gone?"

The young man smiled and replied, "I was only attacked once, so far, so I'd have to call it a success."

"Attacked," asked the suddenly more alert Headmaster, "who would have attacked you?"

"Well," drawled Harry, "what I would call an attack, your Defense Professor would call a test."

"Ah, yes," said Albus, "Severus told me about your...examination. I would have assumed from the amount of work you did over the summer that you would have fared better. Also, from the NEWT test that you inadvertently took, I know that your abilities are better than what you showed. The question is, why were you holding back?"

Answering a question with a question, the green eyed wizard replied, "Why would I want to let Voldemort know what I can do?"

Blue eyes twinkling a little brighter, Dumbledore queried, "Don't you think that Voldemort would have already heard about your test score over the summer?"

Harry shrugged and said, "So let him spend time sorting out which information source is correct."

The old man conceded the point, saying, "Very Slytherin of you, Harry."

The teen smiled and said, "Thank you, sir. I'd like to think that the girls have had a positive influence on me in that respect."

"I must admit that it is good to see you reaching across House lines like you are." The Headmaster said appreciatively.

"You know, it would happen much more if the students had more of an opportunity to interact with each other outside of our own Houses." Harry replied with a thoughtful tone of voice. "The way things are set up right now, there is no way, short of starting an illegal club, to spend time with people outside of our own Houses."

Dumbledore was intrigued by Harry's thoughts and wanted to see what ideas the young man could come up with, "How would you go about changing things, Harry?" He asked as he stroked his long, white beard thoughtfully.

Jumping at the chance to discuss something that he had been thinking about quite a bit over the summer, Harry explained his thoughts, "It could be as simple as providing a central common room where all of the students can meet and socialize. Sure, we can meet in the library, now, but Madam Pince runs a tight, quiet ship. And if you are worried about security or rule breaking, you could schedule prefects to be in the room with students. I'd say one from each house at a time, so there would be no chance for favoritism."

The Headmaster's eyes twinkled madly as he smiled and responded, "I have to say, Harry, your idea does have merit. I shall bring it up with the Heads during our next staff meeting. Now, shall we move on to more pressing concerns?" He continued when Harry nodded, "Excellent! I requested your presence tonight to discuss furthering your training. Your tutors from over the summer have agreed to come in and work with you during the sixth year Gryffindor Defense class period on a rotating schedule. I believe that is Monday and Wednesday mornings?" Harry nodded once again and the old man continued, "Professors McGonagall and Flitwick have agreed to tutor you on Tuesdays and Thursdays, respectively, after lunch, while your lessons with me would be on Wednesdays after lunch. Does this sound acceptable to you? Are there any revisions or changes that you would like to make?"

Harry was flabbergasted at the amount of tutoring he would be receiving. "That sounds excellent, sir. Thank you!"

“May I ask,” said Dumbledore as he watched a smile slowly spread across Harry's lips, “what has caused you to smile so?”

The young wizard's smile became a smirk as he answered, “Oh, I was just picturing the look on Hermione's face when I tell her about my new lessons.”

The Headmaster smiled and said, “Yes, I imagine it will be quite the sight. I see that it has gotten close to curfew, so unless you have any other concerns, I shall leave you to your entertainment for the evening.”

Harry, knowing that he was being dismissed, stood to leave, but paused and turned back to Dumbledore saying, “There is the matter of our rooms, sir.”

“Of course,” Albus said, “I apologize for the delay, my boy. Normally the house elves would be able to complete this task in a day or less, but, and I believe that you will appreciate this, it is taking a bit longer for Professor Flitwick to set up the security measures for the rooms. They are unlike any other set of rooms in the castle. I daresay your new dorms will be as protected as my suite, if not more so.”

“Thank you, sir,” replied Harry gratefully. “I really appreciate the effort you are putting into this.”

“It is no problem, Harry,” said the old man, blue eyes twinkling happily at the pleasant conversation he had just had with the younger teen. “Your apartment should be ready tomorrow after dinner. Filius will need to escort you so that he can set the wards.”

“Thank you, again, sir, goodnight.” The boy said as he left. As he walked back to where he was sleeping that night, he pulled his charmed galleon from his pocket and set the time for the first meeting of the DA to be the following Sunday in the afternoon.

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Both the Professor and student were correct during their meeting. The Headmaster was correct about the rooms being ready, and Harry was correct about Hermione's reaction. The girl let out a high pitched squeal that Harry was surprised hadn't shattered his glasses. She then began babbling about all of the knowledge that would be imparted on him and what an honor it was. The brunette also commented that he had better share all that he learned with them. That kind of knowledge was priceless.

Hermione was finally silenced when Daphne landed a searing kiss on the excited girl's lips that was so passionate, it had the rest of the occupants of the Room of Requirement squirming in their seats. Luckily, it was just Harry and the girls, so no new gossip would be spread. Harry grinned and said, "Thanks Daph," even as he crossed his legs to hide his reaction.

After dinner the next evening, Professor Flitwick met Harry and his consorts at the Gryffindor table. "Good evening, ladies, Mr. Potter," greeted the tiny teacher as he bounced on his toes in obvious excitement, "if you would follow me, I'll show you to your new apartment."

The group made their way out of the Great Hall and seemed to follow the other Lions toward Gryffindor tower. They were led straight past the students filing in past the portrait of the Fat Lady that protected the common room. Speaking up to answer the question that had not yet been spoken, but was in everyone's mind, the Charms Professor said, "Each house has a set of five apartments connected to it. You are being placed here because Miss Granger needs access to the Gryffindor common room as she is still a Prefect."

They neared a portrait that no one had seen before. It was of a beautiful full-bodied woman with honey blonde hair that hung in flowing waves down to just past her shoulder blades. The most prominent features on her heart-shaped face were her full, ruby red lips, were her soulful moss green eyes. Her curvy body was draped in robes of green and brown, giving her the feel of an earth-mother type.

"Good evening, Professor," she said in a voice that was like satin, "are you finally going to introduce me to my charges?"

Flitwick was a bit flustered as he responded, "I mean no offense, dear lady, but you are not the portrait that was selected for this post." He was being very polite as he knew that the portraits were not only sensitive, but could make your life a living hell in the castle. No one likes to be hollered at everywhere they go.

"True, and as good of a job Sir Cadogan would have done, I insisted on this privilege for myself. I assume you have no objection?" Inquired the woman, though she seemed to be telling instead of asking.

"Ah, no, no. No objections," stuttered the short man. He was unaware of who the person this portrait was depicting, but, along with the other teachers and staff, he was aware that this portrait seemed to be able to command all of the other painting in the castle. Even the ones in the Headmaster's office.

"Very well," the voluptuous woman said, "then shall we set about allowing the young ones entrance into their new home?"

"Yes! Yes," squeaked the Charms master excitedly, "your rooms will be protected far better than just a password. Only those living here will be able to open the door. This portrait, charmed to read your magical signature will be the guardian of your room. Or, at least, it will be once we get you all keyed into it. All you will need to do to enter will be to place your hand on this stone." He pointed to a stone that was beside the portrait and stuck out from the wall a bit. I currently had a hole in it about the width of a wand. Flitwick continued, "To register yourself, you just need to stick your wand in the hole and have Mr. Potter say, "Enter, then your full name," then you will cast a lumos spell into the hole. Once your signature is locked, the portrait will acknowledge you."

"Professor," said Harry, astonished, "this is brilliant! Where did you get the idea from, though? It looks very similar to something I read in my mother's journal."

Filius gasped and spun around to look at the young wizard, "You have your mother's journal?" He asked excitedly.

“Yeah, my dad's, too. Si- ah, th-they were given to me at the beginning of the summer.” Harry had winced and stammered at the almost mention of his godfather, before his voice lost all emotion and inflection as he finished speaking. The girls shared a worried look for a split second before Luna wound her arms around Harry's waist from his left while Tracey did the same on his right. Daphne and Blaise stood as close as they could behind the young man and put their hands on his shoulders. Hermione stepped in front of her best friend and gently cupped both of his cheeks in her soft hands.

The grieving teen had closed his eyes in an attempt to fight off the emotions swirling like a tornado through him. He began to calm slightly when he felt the young women crowding in around him and he relaxed completely at the feeling of Hermione's thumbs stroking his cheeks.

“Open your eyes, Harry,” his best friend's voice called out gently.

Complying, the young wizard lost himself for a moment in the feeling of caring, compassion, and understanding that he could see radiating out of the cinnamon eyes he was gazing into. The bushy-haired girl spoke softly, with a warm voice, “You're allowed to feel, Harry. You don't have to hide your emotions around us. I know it hurts, but it might hurt less if you let us help you.” She watched the internal struggle happening behind the wizard's green eyes and hope flowed through her as she saw which way he seemed to be leaning.

A second later she was cursing mentally when Harry's mental and emotional walls snapped back into place at the sneering sound of Malfoy's voice, “Twenty points from Gryffindor, Potter, for letting a disgusting Mudblood touch you.”

The Slytherin boy paled, though, when a furious Professor Flitwick stepped into view from where he had been hidden by the group hug. “Thirty points from Slytherin, Mr. Malfoy, for abuse of Prefect powers, and an additional thirty for using that disgusting word. Another night of detention with Mr. Filch might teach you some better manners as well. Now, be on your way!” Filius squeaked angrily.

The group, teacher included, took a moment to compose themselves after Draco had scampered off, Pansy Parkinson following faithfully and silently behind him, not having had a chance to open her mouth. The girls all sighed and disengaged, reluctantly, from Harry, realizing that there was no way they could get him to open up now. Luna noticed the sad look on the portrait's face and shrugged at it. The woman in the painting gave the young blonde an encouraging smile, then brought her attention back to the two wizards who had begun speaking again.

"I believe we were discussing my mother's journal?" Asked Harry, trying to change the subject.

"Right," Flitwick said as he started a bit, "right, well, the reason that this may look familiar to you is because your mother created it. Or, at least, she started the process. She was working on it with me before your parents went into hiding. I will give you the completed notes, You can keep it for yourself, publish it for others, or sell it to the goblins or the Ministry. Any way you choose, this security system is very valuable."

Harry had a muted smile on his face, the feelings of pride for his mother's accomplishments breaking through the overwhelming pain of their, and Sirius', loss. "Shall we get started?" Asked the Professor after a short moment. When the teens nodded he said, "Mr. Potter first, that way it will set you as the one who controls the list of accepted entrants."

The younger wizard stepped up to the wall and said clearly, "Enter, Harry James Potter." He then stuck his wand in the hole and cast the lumos spell. He held that position for a few moments before the woman in the portrait smiled widely and said, "Welcome home, Harry."

The girls all followed entering their magical signatures into the "system," as Harry began to call it. "Excellent!" said Flitwick once they had finished. "Now, just ask to be let in and we'll see if it worked properly."

Harry nodded and turned to comply, but as he opened his mouth, he paused with a confused look blossoming on his face. He scratched the back of his neck and asked instead, "Erm, sorry for not asking earlier, but, what do we call you?"

A regally amused smile spread over the woman's lips and her eyes twinkled, much like the Headmaster's, as she answered, "That is quite alright, Harry. You all may call me Haleigh."

"That is a very beautiful name, Haleigh. May we enter our new home, please?" Harry asked.

"Thank you, Harry, and yes, you may." Instead of the portrait swinging open like the Gryffindor entrance, the wall to the right of the frame shimmered for a moment before an ornately carved oak door appeared, much like the Room of Requirement. Seeing that everything had worked properly, the Charms teacher said, "Well, I shall leave you to get yourselves settled. Goodnight."

The students all thanked the small man as he waved and walked away down the corridor. "After you," said Harry as he held the door open for the ladies. He followed them into their new common room and was awed by what he saw. The setup and size was very close to the Gryffindor common room. Several overstuffed chairs and couches were arranged around a large fireplace, which they could use to floo into Gryffindor common room, while chairs and tables sat along the edges. Instead of the Gryffindor colors of red and gold, the room was painted in warm earth tones, with the effect of making the room comfortable, inviting, and peaceful.

Sitting above the fireplace mantle was another copy of the portrait that hung in the corridor. Haleigh was smiling kindly down at the teens as they searched through their new sitting room.

"Would you like a tour?" Haleigh asked, drawing attention back to herself. "Do you have a frame in each room?" Asked Blaise as she tested the couch, letting out a low groan of appreciation as she sat.

"I do, it is so that, no matter where you are, you will be able to grant or deny access to your rooms when someone knocks. I'll let you

know who it is and ask if you want me to allow them in.” The portrait replied.

Tracey, from where she stood looking out of a window, asked, “I’m assuming the Heads and Headmaster can get in when they want?”

The woman in the painting shook her blonde head and said, “No, actually, though Dumbledore was most insistent. You are in complete control of who has access to this room. It is more secure that way.”

Hermione looked up from where she was inspecting the half-full bookshelves with Luna, “How can you disagree or disobey the Headmaster? I thought all of the Hogwarts portraits were under his command? It says so in *Hogwarts: A History*.”

Haleigh gave a lilting laugh and said, “What a wonderful book! Yes, the Headmaster does have control of the portraits throughout the castle. Luckily for you, though, I am no ordinary portrait.” Before Hermione could puzzle through what that statement meant, the blonde woman continued, “Now, the next floor up is the lavatory, I shall meet you there.”

She then walked out of the side of the picture frame. The teens all spared a look at each other before rushing up the stairs to see their new bathroom. Up a flight of stairs and through a set of doors was a bath that rivaled the Prefects’ for size and grandeur. Each person had their own shower stall and sink, which stood in front of a massive floor to ceiling mirror. A bath tub, which was about as big as a medium sized swimming pool, was set into the floor in the middle of the room. The toilets were through a door opposite the entrance from the stairs.

“Not bad,” said Daphne, appraisingly. The group spent quite a bit of time inspecting the bathroom, forgetting that they had the bedrooms to look at another floor up. Harry glanced at his watch and realized that he would be late for his detention with Snape if he did not leave immediately. He would still have to sprint through the castle.

He called out as he exited the bathroom, “Pick whatever bedrooms you want and put my bag in whatever is left over. I have to run to be

on time for detention. Bye.” Harry sprinted out of the dorms, hearing the sounds of the girls yelling their goodbyes after him. As he ran through the halls on the way to his third straight detention with the malevolent Defense teacher, he muttered to himself, “At least this year I don't have to deal with that blood quill,” while unconsciously rubbing the scar on the back of his hand.

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The five young women yelled after Harry as they watched him run from the room. They stood for a moment, trying to decide whether or not they wanted to leave the luxurious bathroom just yet, but eventually decided to take a look at the bedrooms that were on the floor above them. As they were inspecting the first room, which happened to be the master bedroom, Hermione flopped herself down onto the over-sized and massively comfortable bed, exclaiming, “He was so close to opening up! Bloody Malfoy!”

Luna sat next to the distraught girl and patted the bushy haired girl's knee affectionately, “He is a very closed off man, Hermione. He isn't going to open up easily or painlessly. It's going to be very difficult for all of us. He will open up to us, though. Harry won't be able to keep his emotions in check for that long.”

“I know, Luna, I just want to help him so badly!” Exclaimed Hermione, plaintively.

“We all want to help him, love. We just need to be patient with him, ourselves, and each other. We'll get there, don't worry.” Daphne said, as she kissed her lover on the forehead. “Now, let's pick out our rooms. I think we should let Harry have the master suite, since he is the one that made this all possible anyway.”

The girls agreed with their redheaded partner and went off to inspect the other rooms. The other rooms were just as nice as the Master suite, even if they were smaller, had smaller beds, and no separate water closet. They spent an hour deciding who would occupy each room, knowing that at least two of the rooms would be empty at any time. Each girl unpacked what they wanted from their bags, organized their living quarters some, then met in the common room.

“Well,” asked Blaise as she lounged in one of the couches, “what do we do now?”

“I would like to take a bath before bed tonight. That bathtub upstairs looked wonderful.” Replied Luna as she sat on the floor in front of Blaise, who began running her fingers through the younger girl's blonde hair.

Hermione spoke next from her spot next to Daphne on the other couch in the common room, as Tracey laid down on the couch next to Blaise, so that they were head-to-toe. “That does sound like a good idea, Luna, though I believe we should get at least some of our homework done before we relax for the night.”

Daphne sighed and said, “You're right, love, let's at least get started.”

Grudgingly, the other girls sat up and moved to the table to work on their homework for an hour or two. While working, the sixth years began excitedly discussing their Arithmancy work, which drew the attention of Luna. Deciding to give it up as a bad job, they put away their work and moved to the bathroom, still discussing the homework problems.

Harry returned a short time after his consorts had begun their bath. He stalked down the hall to their dorm, muttering darkly, covered in a thick, black, smelly goo. The young man stomped up to the portrait and, without a word, slapped his hand on the correct stone. Haleigh snickered slightly as she welcomed him back and indicated that the newly reappeared door was open.

Harry froze in place halfway through the sitting room when he heard Haleigh's voice saying, “I assume you are going to want to wash up? Your consorts are already in the bath.”

“Erm,” Harry delayed answering as he stared down at his shoes, “could you ask when they'll be done?”

“Of course,” the woman in the portrait replied as she disappeared, once again, out of the frame. She returned a few moments later,

“They said that it is safe for you to join them now. They each put on swimming costumes.”

The teen boy sagged in relief and said, “Thanks,” as he made his way up the stairs to a greatly needed shower. He gaped in confusion and not a little arousal at the scene he walked into. Daphne, Blaise, Tracey, and Hermione were lounging against the side of the pool-sized bath wearing bikinis, while Luna, also in a bikini, though Harry really couldn't tell since the water was opaque and seemed to be fizzing slightly, was floating in the middle of the bath. All he could see of her was her head, hands and toes, which were sticking out of the water.

They were all discussing something that was written on the chalkboard that had been conjured, along with a piece of chalk and eraser. The chalkboard sat by the side of the pool while the chalk and eraser were bouncing merrily in front of it, waiting for instruction from the witches that had created it. Harry quickly realized they were working on a particularly tricky Arithmancy problem, taking control of the chalk with a flick of their wands.

Hermione was currently in control of the chalk, “This can't be right! If it were, the power that would be needed to cast the spell would be astronomical. I doubt there is a wizard or witch alive that could do it. No, we must have made a mistake somewhere.”

From where she was floating, Luna flicked her wand taking control of the chalk and said, “Perhaps if you switched these two variables, the product would be a bit more reasonable, though not much. Hello, Harry, would you like to join us?”

The fifth year's acknowledgement snapped the others out of their focus and they noticed for the first time what state their friend was in.

“Sweet Merlin, Harry!” Exclaimed Tracey, “What did the git have you doing?”

The teen boy shuddered and said quietly, “I don't want to talk about it.”

"Well," Blaise offered, "come on in, the water's wonderful."

Harry's gaze switched being himself and the pool. A look of longing as he looked towards the warm, soothing water and a look of contempt as he looked at the sorry state of his robes. "Better not. I don't want to muck up your nice water."

That said, he turned and went to a shower stall where he closed the door and stripped, tossing his soiled robes out of the shower stall. The clothes disappeared seconds after settling on the ground, no doubt compliments of Dobby.

After a long shower, Harry exited the stall dressed in only a towel. The witches were still lounging in the bath, though by now the chalkboard had disappeared. They all still had their bikinis on and were enjoying the relaxing bath salts with their eyes closed. Tracey slid one eye open to look at Harry as he stood and stared at them. "Care to join us Harry? The water is still rather wonderful." The blonde Slytherin beckoned.

The black haired young man sighed and shook his head, "Next time, definitely. I've been putting off looking at those marriage contract proposals for too long. I really want to get them out of the way tonight."

Daphne opened her eyes and asked, "Do you still want our help?" Harry nodded and said, "Of course I do, but don't get out on my account. I'll manage just fine."

"Nonsense," the redhead replied as she stood. She made some excuse about her skin getting wrinkly, but Harry wasn't paying attention. He was focused solely on the water that was running down her bikini-clad form. The next thing he knew, Hermione was pushing his jaw closed. The young wizard, embarrassed at being caught ogling at his best friend's girlfriend, stammered out an apology.

Hermione responded to his stuttering with amusement in her voice and eyes, "Don't worry about it, Harry. She has that effect on me, too. Let's get changed and head down to the common room."

He was shown to his new bedroom, then slipped on a pair of pajama pants and a t-shirt, grabbed his bag and rejoined the girls who were dressed similarly, but also had bath robes wrapped around them. The young man dropped into one of the chairs, then rummaged through his bag, pulling out proposal after proposal. The witches sat and stared at the pile of about one hundred marriage contract proposals. "Right," he said after he was sure he retrieved the last one from his bag, "well, it's rather a lot, isn't it?"

"That's a bit of an understatement, Harry," stated "Luna as she poked at the pile with her bare toes. The young man shrugged and reached for a scroll when Tracey's voice stopped him.

"How are you planning on answering these?"

Green eyes stared blankly back at the former Davis followed by a voice saying slowly, "By...saying...no?"

"What Tracey meant," Blaise cut in with an amused tone of voice, "is; How are you going to say no? Are you going to write each response individually, or would you like to create a standard response letter and use a spell to copy it however many times you need to?"

Understanding mixed with a bit of embarrassment showed through Harry's eyes as he responded, "Yeah, the second option sounds good. How about this as a standard response letter:

Dear so-and-so,

I have received and read the proposed contract you have submitted. In accordance with the wishes of the Head of Houses Potter and Black, I must reject all terms and conditions of said proposed contract. This makes the contract null and void and thus, is being returned to you unsigned.

Harry James Potter

Head of House Potter

Head of House Black."

“That's excellent, Harry,” praised Daphne, who had taught him how to “speak officially”, as she called it. “Straight and to the point and no chance for misinterpretation.” The wizard smiled his thanks and leaned in to grab the first proposal. As he unrolled it, what appeared to be a picture fell out and landed face down on the floor. His eyes bugged out of his face as it first paled, then turned an impressive green color when he picked up the picture and looked at it.

“Bah!” Harry screamed as he flung the picture away and started rubbing his eyes, as if he could wipe the image out of them.

“Honestly, Harry,” chided Hermione as she picked up the picture, “it can't be all that ba-” Her voice stopped abruptly when she saw the picture for herself. “I'm sorry Harry. You were not acting immaturely.” Unable to contain their curiosity, the Slytherins crowded around behind Luna as she plucked the offending image from her bushy haired friend's limp fingers.

“Merlin! She must be at least eighty!” Exclaimed Blaise.

“Contract says eighty three.” Replied Harry as he finished preparing the copy of the response letter.

“She's very limber for an octogenarian,” said Luna as she tilted her head to the left, “I'm impressed that she can get both legs behind her head.”

“She looks pretty pleased that she could get her whole fist in there.” Mused Daphne as she blinked repeatedly.

“True, but that camel doesn't look to pleased at what's happening underneath it.” Continued Blaise.

“Accio picture,” snapped out Harry quickly, deftly catching the disgusting image and immediately inserting it back with the contract documents. He wrapped his response outside the bundle and sealed it with both of the official Black and Potter wax and seal.

The group spent the next two hours sorting through Harry's marriage contract proposals. Out of the ninety nine remaining proposals, there were fifty seven more pictures and only five of the women in those pictures were above fifty years old. None of them were as flexible or adventurous as the eighty-three year old sexpot. There were also thirty or so pairs of knickers packaged in with the contracts, some washed, most not.

Harry truly began to appreciate living with five women who were attracted to the fairer sex as they came across more and more of the photos. He quickly realized that not only did the girls not care that he was ogling the pictures of the more attractive women, they were doing the same. Though everyone was trying to appear discrete, Blaise quickly broke through that barrier when she loudly declared, "Merlin, Harry! Are you sure you want to turn down this one?" The blonde haired witch passed the picture of a leggy, obviously natural blonde beauty that made Harry's blood flow directly into his pants.

"Yeah," he replied, "I still want to say no, but wow!"

After that, pictures of the more attractive candidates were shared with the group. The young man paused for a moment, after Hermione passed him a picture of a particular busty redhead, and asked his best friend, "how is it that you are alright with me checking out other girls and are, in fact, actively helping me to do that, when two years ago you got rather miffed at Ron drooling all over Fleur?"

Hermione blushed a bit and answered, "Well, I was just starting to discover my sexuality, so a bit of it was jealousy. A larger part of it, though, was the fact that one of the two wizards I was interested in, the one that had actually shown any interest in me, was drooling over another girl. The final part is that sometimes, Ron just irritates the stuffing out of me."

Harry laughed loudly at the last bit of Hermione's explanation while the brunette rolled her eyes at him completely glossing over the fact that she had been interested in two wizards.

Though Daphne, Blaise and Tracey had informed him, repeatedly, Harry was still surprised by the first Hogwarts student to have a

contract proposal submitted to him, even if he wasn't surprised by the name.

“Oh, come on!” Bellowed Harry in exasperation, making the others jump.

“What is it, Harry?” Asked Hermione. The young man simply passed her the parchment. When she read the name she burst out into a full laughing fit. Harry crossed his arms in front of his chest and slumped down further into his chair, grumbling about insane witches with insanely strong hands. A minute or so after the parchment had been passed around and the ladies all had finished laughing, the wizard's eyes lit up, “Can't I just mail her a response? I won't have to go near the crazy bint, then.”

Daphne chuckled some more and said, “Sorry Harry, etiquette states that anyone you can answer in person, you must do so. That means anyone from Hogwarts.” The wizard groaned loudly in frustration and snatched the next contract proposal off of the pile.

Several moments later, Blaise exclaimed, “Here's one for Parvati Patil,” waving the contract in the air. Tracey looked up from the parchment she was holding with raised eyebrows and said, “Strange. Here's one for Padma.”

“Oh my!” Exclaimed Hermione, “I've got one for the both of them, together.”

“Kinky,” said Luna, serenely, not looking up from the proposal she was reading. Contracts for Lisa Turpin, Susan Bones, Lavender Brown, Millicent Bulstrode, and two others that garnered stronger reactions from the group appeared throughout the rest of the pile.

The first was a proposal that had almost illegible handwriting and what appeared to be food stains all over it. “Ginny?!? Is that what this says? I can barely read it.” Exclaimed Harry as he passed the parchment to Daphne who had much better eyesight.

"Yes, that's definitely Ginny's name," said the redhead of the redhead, "and it seems to have been signed by Arthur Weasley, thought it's barely legible. What's her birthday?"

Luna answered, "August twelve, 1981, why?"

Daphne smirked and said, "Because, this was signed on the thirteenth of August, 1981. Apparently, dead old dad had a few too many to drink in celebration. Oh! Harry's dad was there, too!"

Suddenly more interested, Harry asked brightly, "How can you tell?"

"James is mentioned in the contract. Listen," she said and began reading, "I propose that my friend James here's son, Harry, marry my brand-new baby girl when she comes of age. Jimmy has agreed to forgo Article Twelve, which is good because if that boy touches my baby girl before they're married, I'll kill him."

"What is Article Twelve?" Hermione asked, "I keep seeing it, but I thought it had to do with money or something. It wasn't in any of the books I read about this."

"Article Twelve states that a wizard can "test the physical compatibility" of his proposed bride," answered Tracey with a disgusted look on her face. "It was an unwritten law, that somehow got written."

"Basically," clarified Blaise, "it says that the wizard can shag the girl before they're married, and if he doesn't like her, the contract is dropped."

"This world is so backwards, it's disgusting." Snarled Harry, making each of the girls smile at his sense of honor.

"You're a good man, Harry Potter," said Luna, dreamily.

The young man blinked, blushed, then cleared his throat and muttered, "thanks," as he picked up the last contract.

“Last contract proposal is for,” he paused for dramatic effect, and to open the parchment and read it, before his eyebrows shot up in surprise and said simply, “Daphne.”

“WHAT?!?” Shrieked both Daphne and Hermione. “Let me see that,” snarled the redhead as she grabbed the offending parchment out of Harry's shocked and unresisting hands.

“That rotten, bloody bastard!” Screamed the angry girl. “The only reason he sent this is because he wants to get something in return for sending me off.” Hermione got up from her chair and moved over to embrace and comfort her girlfriend.

Harry asked quietly, “What effect does this have on you being my consort?”

Luna, who had picked up the proposal after Daphne had angrily tossed it on the ground, replied, “Luckily none. This was filed two days after our contract had become effective. If this had gone through first, our contract would have become null and void and Daphne would have had to sign a new consort contract. This would have meant she would have needed to move back to the Slytherin dorms because your protection would not have covered her any longer.”

“Thank Merlin for small favors,” exhaled Blaise, “she wouldn't have lasted a night there.” Daphne and Hermione acknowledged this statement by hugging each other a little tighter.

Harry rose from his seat, after he completed the standard response letter for Mr. Greengrass, and sunk to one knee in front of the hugging girls. He gently took one of Daphne's hands in both of his and said, in a calm, caring voice, “Daphne Lorelei Greengrass, I, Harry James Potter, Head of House Potter and Head of House Black, do hereby reject all terms and conditions of the proposed marriage contract. Thus making said contract null and void.”

The young man remained for a moment staring into Daphne's violet eyes, which had a look he didn't understand in them.

“That was the sweetest rejection I've ever seen,” said Blaise dryly, breaking the moment. Though she was wiping tears out of her eyes. The teens broke into laughter and, since they had finished, decided to head to bed while their moods were still high.

Chapter 14:

He sat on his broom hovering over the Quidditch Pitch. He was high enough so that he could see the path from the pitch to the castle over the top of the stands. Groups of students were making their way towards the stadium, signaling dinner had finally come to an end and try-outs were about to begin. The young wizard looked to his best friend, who was racing around the edge of the pitch, clearly enjoying being on a broom. He had to admit that it felt great being back on a broom himself. The weather was certainly helping that enjoyment. The sky was clear and the sun that was beginning to set was still giving off a comfortable warmth, though the breeze that blew his hair about was a bit chilly. "Oh well," he thought, "we'll have to play in weather much colder than this."

He caught his friend's green eyes and motioned that they should land. Harry nodded and dove for the ground, pulling up and dismounting with a fluid grace that had only increased since his training had started. Ron landed a moment later and brushed his red hair out of his eyes.

"Dinner over?" Harry asked.

"Finally," Ron answered with a nod. He was looking paler by the minute and a cold sweat had broken out on his forehead. "I'm ready to get this started," he said, though his voice sounded anything but ready.

Harry clapped a hand on the shoulder of his suddenly green-faced friend and said reassuringly, "You'll be fine, Ron. Just speak in a loud, clear, and firm voice. If they are serious about the try-out, they'll listen. It's not like you don't have a plan ready. You've put off homework all week working on it."

A bit of normal color returned to the redhead's still pale face and he didn't look like he would retch all over the field at any second. Ron then asked, "And if they don't listen to me?"

Harry grinned and said, "Then they aren't serious about trying out and you can boot them from the pitch. They're here, let's get this started, captain."

At being called captain, Ron's back straightened a bit, his chest sticking out importantly. The two wizards paused when they saw the group that had crowded the pitch. It was far larger than they thought it would be.

"Bloody hell!" Exclaimed the captain, "I didn't think there were this many Gryffindors!"

"There aren't," announced Katie Bell drolly as she approached her two teammates. "A bunch of girls from other houses have come to get an eyeful of the Boy-Who-Lived." A roll of the eyes showed Harry exactly what the older girl thought of that. He was glad that Katie was a real friend, and not one of the ravening fan girls. "Though, I don't see your girls out there, Harry. Well, besides Hermione."

Harry nodded and said, "Blaise, Daphne, Tracey, and Luna are all in the library. We figured it would be easier to boot any interlopers if no one but Gryffindors were allowed."

"Why would Hermione be here anyway?" Asked Ron, baffled, "She hates Quidditch."

The raven-haired teen raised an eyebrow and replied, sarcastically, "I dunno, Ron, maybe she's supporting her friends. You know, just like she always does."

The hot headed redhead had the decency to look abashed as he muttered, "Right, sorry," before the senior chaser pulled his attention back to the situation.

"Want to get started?" She asked impatiently.

"Right, yes, right," the captain stammered a moment. He composed himself, mounted his broom and flew a dozen feet into the air so that everyone could see him. A quick Sonorus on his throat so he could be heard and he began, "'Welcome to the Gryffindor Quidditch Try-

outs. If you aren't a Gryff, then you aren't welcome here and you should get out." He paused to stare pointedly at anyone not wearing Gryffindor colors until they left. Satisfied, he continued, "Now that we've got some privacy, anyone who is here to ogle Harry, please do so from the stands." About a third of the group, including all of the first years, joined Hermione in the stands to watch.

"Ok, then, this is a much more manageable group. Now, split up into positions. Keepers here, Chasers by Katie, Beaters here, and Seekers by Harry." Directed Ron.

A nameless voice called out, "What if we want to try-out for more than one position?"

"Well," answered Ron, "Seekers are going first, so, if you are trying out for that, go stand by Harry first.

The potential quidditch players broke into groups. Harry was surprised by the number of students around him. Though he didn't know all of their names, he recognized that there were two second-years, four third-years, two fourth-years, Ginny, and a seventh-year named Cormac McLaggen.

"I thought you wanted to play Chaser, Ginny?" Asked Harry.

"Oh, I do," answered the youngest Weasley, "I just thought I would give you a little friendly competition. Can't hurt to have more than one position, in case I don't make it as a chaser.

"As if there is any doubt, Gin," said the incumbent Seeker, causing the girl to blush a tiny bit at the praise.

Ron drifted over so that he was hovering above their group. He opened his mouth to speak when a second-year raised his hand. "Go ahead, erm, I don't know your name."

"Euan Abercrombie," the boy said, "I was wondering if the rest of us Seeker potentials could try-out separately. All of us know that we have no chance against Harry, but we were thinking you might have a back-up squad.

“Speak for yourself, kid,” bellowed Cormac. He puffed out his chest and said, “I’ve been waiting five years for this. I’m going to show boy-wonder over there what’s what about seeking.

Harry’s green eyes narrowed into a fierce glare, directed at the barrel-chested older man.

“Harry?” Asked Ron and a curt nod was his reply.

“Alright, anyone else want to try for starter?” The redhead asked, mostly looking at his sister. Ginny, who had no desire to get in the middle of what looked to be a brutal battle, smiled and stepped back to join the other hopefuls.

Seeing an opportunity to better his image even more, in his mind, Cormac once again turned on Harry. “How about we make this more interesting, Potter?”

“What are you on about McClaggen?” Snarled Harry.

“A little side bet,” the larger boy goaded, “if you win, I’ll do whatever you ask. If I win, I get your firebolt.”

“No,” replied the younger wizard, not even wanting to think about losing his precious broom.

“What’s the matter, Potter? Afraid you’re going to lose?” McClaggen continued to taunt, further enraging Harry. “Maybe you’re not as good as everyone makes out. Maybe after I whip you in the air, I can teach those girls that are always around you what a real man is like.”

The incumbent seeker, eyes starting to glow green in his rage looked at Ron and snapped, “Let’s go!”

The Captain nodded once and said, “After I release the snitch, I’ll count to three, then you’ll fly. Whoever catches it first will be the starter.” Both teens nodded and mounted their brooms. The redhead released the snitch and counted down from three. As soon as he said, “Go,” Harry was off like a flash with Cormac a moment behind him.

The larger McClaggen knew that he could not keep up with the other boy due to his greater size and inferior broom. While a Nimbus 2001 was a great broom, it just wasn't a Firebolt. So, the seventh year decided on a strategy of physically harassing Harry, hoping to frustrate this opponent into making a mistake.

Harry leveled off high above the Quidditch Pitch, wanting a moment to calm himself. It wouldn't do to actually kill the braggart. His moment of peace never came, though, since as soon as he stopped ascending, the flying bowling ball of a man crashed into his left side. The impact knocked the green eyed seeker off course, took his breath away, and nearly made him lose grip on his broom. By the time he had righted himself, he had to dodge a second rush from Cormac.

This was the way the competition progressed. For the next twenty minutes. Anytime Harry would slow to catch his breath or look for the snitch, Cormac would bull rush him. Whenever the younger seeker would dive as if he had seen the snitch, the challenger would not pay attention to the possibility of winning, but more to making sure that Harry didn't win.

After that short amount of time, Harry had already taken seven or eight shots and his ribs were protesting greatly. He knew that if he got hit anymore, he would probably break a few ribs. Deciding to get a little revenge, the smaller wizard descended so that he was circling close to the inner wall of the stands. He ignored the snitch that was glinting across the field, knowing that McClaggen wouldn't notice it, and slowed to make himself an easier target.

Cormac saw Harry flying slowly by the stadium wall, looking injured, and smirked to himself. He aimed his broom on an intercept course and put on as much speed as possible, intending a knock-out shot. The smaller wizard could see the larger coming and maintained his course and speed. At the very last second, Harry performed a picture perfect sloth-grip and dive, neatly making McClaggen miss him and crash full speed into the wall, causing the seventh year to tumble to the ground with a dislocated shoulder.

Satisfied with his success, the green eyed wizard turned his gaze back to finding the snitch again. On the ground, Cormac shook the cobwebs from his head before his face took on a mask of murderous anger. Bellowing his rage, the larger teen jumped on his broom and tore after his competition, intent on causing as much pain as possible.

Harry glanced behind him when he heard the angry yell and cursed at the sight of the ball of rage hurtling after him. He pulled his Firebolt up and fired straight into the sky. Once he had attained a decent altitude, he halted his ascent, dodged McClaggen, then dove straight for the ground. Cormac cursed loudly when he missed and dove after Harry.

The two seekers dove perilously fast toward the ground. As they fell, Harry finally caught sight of the snitch, which was hovering just above the grass directly below the two wizards. The lead Seeker adjusted his angle slightly, so that he was aimed to the right of the hovering golden ball.

Ron watched with his mouth gaping as Harry and Cormac launched themselves at the ground. No one so much as breathed as the distance between the fliers and the hard earth lessened. The whole of Gryffindor House flinched at the sickening thud of impact.

Harry landed gracefully next to his redheaded Captain, grabbed Ron's wrist, and dropped the snitch and a handful grass into his palm.

"Right, erm, right," said Ron faintly, still shocked at the brutality of Harry's catch. "I-I guess that means Harry's still seeker. Erm, could someone get McClaggen to the Hospital Wing?"

"HARRY POTTER!" Hermione's voice rang out over the pitch. "You get over here RIGHT NOW!"

"That's one helluva Sonorus," said one of the younger Chaser potentials.

"She didn't use a spell for that," muttered Harry as he hopped on his Firebolt and flew over to the irate brunette. "Blimey," said the Chaser hopeful.

As soon as he landed, Hermione launched herself at Harry, hugging him tightly around the waist, thankfully missing his ribs.

"I hate the wonky faint." She said quietly into his chest.

Understanding flooded the young man and he chuckled saying, "I'm sorry I worried you, Hermione. I let myself get carried away. I promise not to take such risks anymore."

"No," said Hermione vehemently, "you'll do whatever it takes to win, because that's who you are and I wouldn't change that for anything. Just...be ready to calm me down afterwards."

Harry laughed happily at his best friend's declaration, pleased that she wasn't asking him to change. "I can do that."

"Thank you," the brunette said, "now go and help Ron. It looks like he could use another set of eyes." The two teens laughed at their redheaded friend trying to see everything at once. His head was spinning around so fast they thought he would get whiplash.

So, with a peck on his cheek and a slap on his bum that made him blush and squawk, respectively, Hermione sent Harry back to the try-out. She sighed and sat back down, opening her book once more, keeping one eye on the game as she always had.

Ron was sitting high in the air watching the Chaser hopefuls run the drills he had explained to them. He was mentally sorting them by skill level. Katie Bell was the best, as he had anticipated, but Ginny wasn't too far behind the older girl. The next skill level were the fliers that had decent ability, but were still a bit raw. The redhead knew that his final starter would come from this group and hoped that they wouldn't take too much work.

Seamus Finnegan, Cormac McLaggen, who had somehow gotten patched up enough to return and try-out for Chaser, and little Demelza Robins, a second year girl. There were three or four others in this group, but they weren't standing out as much. The final group of hopefuls were the students that could barely stay on their brooms or couldn't throw or catch the quaffle to save their lives. There were

several who actually fell off their broom any time a quaffle came close to them.

Harry was just floating up to his friend's side as Ron called all of the potential Chasers together. "Alright, you lot, I'm going to sort you into two groups. Group one to my left, group 2 to my right." He then started calling out names followed by either a one or two. Some of the smarter Gryffindors' shoulders slumped in disappointment when they were sorted into group one and Katie and Ginny were sorted into group two. Their fears were proven to be correct when, after he finished sorting, Ron dismissed group one, but still invited them to watch the rest of the try-out.

None of the rejected Chasers stayed while Ron turned to group two and said, "You all can take a breather while we start with the Beaters, unless you are trying out for that position as well." As could have easily been predicted, Cormac puffed out his chest and flew over to the other Beater hopefuls, who rolled their eyes at the seventh year. "Right," Ron said as he followed McClaggen, "same deal as the Chasers. I'm going to release four Bludgers and run some drills and see where we are."

He and Harry split the eight potentials into two groups of four. Ron's group held McClaggen, Andrew Kirke, one of the Beaters that replaced Fred and George last year, and two third year boys. Kirke was much the same as he was the year before; while he could consistently hit the Bludger, it was anyone's guess as to how hard and where it would go. Cormac was also consistent in hitting the iron ball, and it always was with a great deal of power, but the direction was up in the air, sometimes literally. The other two boys flew unsteadily around the pitch, swinging wildly at anything that moved, including Ron. The single time either of them actually hit a Bludger, it continued on its path unabated while the boys dropped their bats or fell off of their brooms.

Harry's group, which included Dean Thomas, Jack Sloper, the other replacement Beater from last year, a second year boy, and Dennis Creevey. While Kirke hadn't improved his performance, Sloper had. Slightly. Most of his shots now had decent power and average direction, though there was the occasional errant swing. The veteran

Seeker was very impressed with his dorm mate. Dean had a great deal of power and precision, though his flying was not quite what it should be, which meant that he could deliver a crushing blow to the bludger, when he could reach it on time. Dennis flew well and had pin-point accuracy, but little to no power behind his swings. Harry thought that if he could get the younger Creevey to beef up a bit, they would have a fantastic Beater. The final boy, Eric, Harry thought, hit himself in the face with his bat and was asked to sit down.

Finally, Ron blew his whistle and he and Harry met off to the side, joined quietly by Katie Bell. "Well," asked the Captain, "what do you two think?"

Katie answered first, "If we use anyone from your group, Ron, we'll get murdered."

"I agree," said Harry, "I say we use Sloper and Dean with Dennis as a back up, at least until we get some muscle on Dennis. Once we get Dean some confidence in his flying, and Dennis some meat on his bones, we'll have two really strong Beaters."

"I saw the same," interjected Ron, "now, let's do the Keepers, that way we'll be able to judge the Chasers better."

Katie nodded with an impressed look on her face. Her opinion of the younger redhead was starting to rise.

"Great idea, Ron," praised Harry before he glanced at his watch and winced, "unfortunately, I won't be able to help you with that. I've got to go to my detention with the greasy git. I'll drop by the common room later to see how it went." With a final wave to his teammates, he took off toward the locker room.

"Right, ok," said Ron, as he swallowed nervously. Now that Harry was gone, he knew there would be no one to keep some of the attention off of him. The Boy-Who-Lived's fame did come in handy at times.

Katie rolled her eyes and said in a sarcastic voice, "No time like the present, fearless leader."

The redhead nodded, then shouted to his Keepers. "Keepers! Up to the hoops! Katie and Ginny are going to take five shots each. The one with the most saves gets the back up slot."

The try-out went quickly as there were only four hopefuls. Unsurprisingly, McClaggen was one, while surprisingly, he won the spot, blocking four. The final shot he missed due to being tired and beaten up from his previous try-outs.

"Ok, Seekers. First one to catch the Snitch gets the spot." Said Ron as he released the Snitch. Thirty minutes later and young Euan Abercrombie, a second year, emerged from the group with the winged golden ball in hand.

"Good job, Euan!" Praised Ron, accepting the Snitch back. "Now, Chasers, we're going to see how well you play under pressure. We'll switch every ten minutes, First is Katie, Ginny, and Demelza against Cormac, and if he'll step in as chaser for a bit, Euan. Thanks."

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

As promised, Harry stopped by the Gryffindor Common Room to spend a little time with Ron. They discussed the rest of the try-outs while playing several games of chess. Captain Weasley said that he was impressed with little Demelza Robins' ability to dodge Bludgers. So, the final line up was Ron at Captain and Keeper, with McClaggen as back-up, Harry at Seeker with Euan backing him up, Katie, Ginny, and Demelza at Chaser with Seamus in reserve, and finally, Dean and Jack Sloper at Beater with Dennis Creevey as the back-up.

Harry agreed that it felt like it could be a strong team, so long as they could gel together well. The black haired wizard expressed his confidence in his friend's ability to coach them up. Quite late that evening, the exhausted savior returned to his suite, where the girls were already asleep.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Celia Granger was alone for the moment in the basement kitchen of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. It was fairly late in the afternoon

on the first Saturday after her children left for Hogwarts and she was allowing herself to get lost in thought. She ran her left index finger around the lip of her tea cup as she remembered back to the same time the previous year.

At that point Mother Granger hadn't seen her daughter for more than a total of four or five weeks the entire year and she was desperate, hoping for a letter letting her know that her darling Hermione hadn't vanished from their lives.

There were times that both Celia and Eric absolutely loathed the magical world because it was taking their daughter from them. But this summer changed all of that. For the first time since her second year at Hogwarts, Hermione spent the entire summer with her parents. Sure, they had a few others with them, but all of Hermione's friends were truly wonderful people and it was a joy to host them.

Celia didn't care that her daughter's first relationship was with a female. She found that Daphne was a charming, if reserved, young woman and approved almost immediately. Her and her husband had always told their daughter to follow her heart. The fact that Hermione and Daphne shared in their relationship with Blaise, Tracey, and Luna gave her pause, though she chalked it up to teenage hormones and curiosity. She always did tell Hermione to follow her heart.

The next big change that happened was her and her husband's total immersion into the magical world and all that it contained. Including its wars. She had never been as terrified as the night when her home was attacked, never so sure she was going to die.

Then, just like in the stories they had finally pulled from Hermione, Harry arrived, sword in hand, like a white knight to save them all. If she hadn't already liked this young man from five years of praise from her daughter, she would have loved him instantly. As it was, Celia immediately accepted this green-eyed gladiator as one of her own. Eric seemed to have done the same.

For the next month, the biological mother of one watched her adoptive flock and was once more surprised by Harry. He seemed to be two completely different people depending on the situation. He

appeared to be a shy, emotionally stunted teenage boy at one moment, but at the first sign of danger, or if someone he cared about were threatened, out came the fiercely protective, incredibly deadly warrior. Mother Granger worried that, if he didn't have the right anchor, his personality would shift more and more towards that unrelenting, unfeeling warrior until that was all he was. This was why she charged the girls with breaking through his emotional and physical barriers, though she was certain they would have anyway. Hermione and Luna, at the least, cared far too much about Harry to let him self destruct in that way.

When the teens went back to Hogwarts, the buffer that had been between the Grangers and the rest of the wizards and witches disappeared. Celia was prepared to be ignored, not feeling like she could fit in at all. Ironical, though she didn't know, that this was the same way her daughter felt during the first two months of her first year. So, she was stunned when Bill Weasley, Fleur Delacour, Nymphadora Tonks, and Remus Lupin knocked on the door to the Muggle Room and asked if they could join the Grangers in watching a film. From that point on, Celia no longer felt like an outcast in the massive magical house as she struck up a quick friendship with the two witches. They were joined, whenever it would fit in her schedule, by Hestia Jones, another Auror that was close to Tonks' age.

Celia thought that once the children had gone, the house would be mostly empty, but this was not the case. There were always at least three Order members ready to deploy in case of emergency. Remus, Bill, Fleur, Tonks, Hestia, Arthur and Molly, and Mad-eye all had rooms set aside for them, though Bill and Fleur, Tonks and Hestia, and Molly and Arthur doubled up. A half dozen or so bedrooms were left empty, saved for Order members to have a kip when they came back from late night missions. Molly and Arthur had decided to remain at Grimmauld because, though the Burrow had been repaired, Molly still felt safer at the Fidelius hidden house.

The elder Granger female was extremely pleased at how well she got along with the three younger witches. She found that she related better to them than to Molly, who was older than all of them. Their beliefs on sexuality, relationships, and marriage were much more modern than the Weasley Matriarch's Victorian-style upbringing. It

also helped that their new friends did not look at them like they were either some form of rare animal, or a mentally challenged child, like some of the Order did simply because they were muggles.

Arthur was nice enough, but his "It's amazing what those muggles can accomplish without magic" attitude tended to irk both Celia and Eric.

"We may not be able to turn a bar stool into a pig and back, but at least we don't have to stick our heads into a bloody fire to ring someone." Said Eric one night after explaining to Arthur about cellular telephones, which were becoming more and more prominent in the muggle world.

Celia was broken out of her musings by the sound of raucous laughter coming from the gym area, followed shortly by Remus and Eric having finished their daily work-out. Remus was apparently telling a story from his year teaching at Hogwarts.

"So, after whispering that in Neville's ear, I prepared to release the Boggart again, hoping that the suggestion would work." Remus said, still chuckling. "I flipped the catch on the cabinet and sure enough, Severus stepped out, sneering and greasy as ever. Poor Neville was as white as a sheet and shaking like a leaf in the wind. But, like a true Gryffindor, he raised his wand and incanted, Ridikulus, with his wand aimed straight at Severus, which had been advancing menacingly."

By now, Remus had a rather large audience as the kitchen had filled with people looking for the dinner that Dobby was happily cooking. The werewolf continued weaving his tale, "The boggart froze in place as it had been hit with the full force of the roaring laughter of everyone in the room. There, in the front of the classroom was a perfect replica of Severus Snape decked out in a formal dress, topped off by a dusty old hat with a dead vulture perched on it."

The kitchen was filled, just like the classroom, with roars of laughter, Remus included, though he kept talking after a moment, "It took everything I had not to laugh as hard as the students and continue on with the lecture."

“How long did it take for that story to get around the castle?” Asked Bill as he wiped tears from his eyes.

“Oh, well,” answered Lupin, “the class was right after lunch, so, I believe everyone in the castle knew by the end of dinner. Snape's sneers weren't as effective on the students for the next few weeks, let me tell you.

“The best part, though, was when the Deputy Headmistress showed up at my office that evening. She was carrying a large box with the deepest look of disapproval on her face.” He mused, “Really brought me back to my days as a student. I invited her in and she set the box down on my desk and turned to me and said, “Let's discuss proper classroom examples, Mr. Lupin.” I thought I was going to get sacked on the spot. She turned back to the spot and opened the box, pulled out Dumbledore's pensieve and set it on my desk. She looked at me with that patented McGonagall look; one eyebrow raised, her lips pressed into a thin line, and said, “I believe you know which class I would like to review”.”

Remus' impression of the strict Professor was good enough to elicit peals of laughter from his audience each time he used it. By now, Dobby had served the meal and the guests were eating as well as they could around their laughter, which only increased as Remus continued, “I placed the memory into the bowl and she went in, by herself, to review. I had slumped into my desk chair trying to think of a way out of losing my job. Minerva came out twenty minutes later. She must have watched it four times, since it was only a five minute memory that I put in. Now, keep in mind that, up until this point, I had only seen 'stern Professor McGonagall' smile or chuckle a dozen or so times in seven years as a student.

“So, you can imagine my surprise at the sight of her re-emerging from that bowl, laughing her head off.” Remus paused to let that image sink in before he continued, “That shock, plus the relief that I wasn't getting sacked must have left a funny look on my face because, as soon as Minerva saw it, she started laughing harder than ever. I thought she was going to die. Her face was red as a tomato, tears were streaming from her eyes, and she was clutching her chest. I don't think she calmed down for a half hour.” He shook his head

ruefully, finishing his story, "I had no problem calling her Minerva and seeing her as a friend and colleague after that."

Good cheer permeated the occupants of the kitchen as they finished their meals, chatting happily with their neighbors.

After dessert had been polished off and the dishes had been cleared by a happy house-elf, Moody suddenly sat up straight, his eye following something moving in the house above them. "Mail's here," he grunted several seconds before both Hedwig and Ron's owl Pigwidgeon, Pig for short, flew into the kitchen. Pig immediately began circling Molly's head, though he remained out of her reach, while Hedwig flew a circle around the large room. The snowy owl beat her wings once, batting the tiny scoops owl down into the hands of Mrs. Weasley, before landing in front of Mrs. Granger. As Molly pulled two letters from the legs of Pig, one considerably bigger than the other, Celia untied six from Hedwig.

"Looks like they all wrote you, sweet," said Eric to his wife. Celia smiled radiantly as all of her worries about Hermione drifting away proved to be unfounded. She picked up Hermione's letter first, she could tell by the handwriting as well as it being larger than the others, opened it and began reading, eager to hear about their first week of school.

Dear Mum and Dad,

It's only been one week and I'm already missing the two of you terribly. This year started out very differently than last. First, Harry threw Draco Malfoy out of the window of the moving train! I reprimanded him for it, but I'm pretty sure he could tell my heart wasn't in it. The blonde ponce deserved that and much more for all the abuse he's thrown at us over the years.

Classes are going well so far. Practicing with Harry truly paid off as all of our class work is to be done without speaking the spells out loud. Professor Snape had half of us firing verbal stinging hexes at each other while the other half had to block them silently. Luckily, Tracey, Blaise, Daphne, and I were able to produce perfect silent shields, though the rest of the Gryffindors did not fare as well. They were in a

great deal of discomfort by the end of class, which Ronald made sure everyone knew, quite loudly and many times.

You'll note that I didn't mention Harry participating in that class. That's because the jerk isn't taking it! That friendly trip to see Amelia Bones at the Ministry turned out to be his NEWT examination for Defense! And he passed! I'm both infuriated and proud of the prat. The second more than the first. He can achieve so much if he just puts his mind to it.

We finally moved into our new rooms on Thursday. They are amazing! We have our own spa, essentially. It's so wonderful to be able to live with Daph this year. I'm so happy that you've accepted my relationship with her. Your support is so important to me. I love you both.

Harry discovered that he received around one hundred marriage contract proposals. We all had a grand time helping him sort through them. He's turning them all down, of course. One in particular should provide some extra entertainment if you are there when Mrs. Weasley receives Ginny's letter. Make sure you keep an ear out for it.

Christmas seems so very far away. I can not wait to see you again.

All of my love to both of you,

Hermione

Celia sniffled a bit as she put away her daughter's letter, happy at what she had read and the sentiment behind it. Not knowing anyone else's handwriting, she picked the next letter at random, only to pause and look up at Molly's outraged shriek of "ARTHUR!"

Quickly turning from his conversation with Bill, Arthur replied in a sweet voice, "Yes, dear?"

"You submitted a marriage contract proposal for Ginny to Harry without telling me?!" She asked in a dangerous tone.

"What? I don't remember doing that! There must be an impostor!"
Said a panicking Patriarch.

"Of course you don't!" Molly snapped, "Apparently, you were were drunk!"

At that moment, a large Ministry owl swooped in and delivered a rolled up piece of parchment to Arthur. He quickly unrolled and read both documents. First, Harry's declination, then his original submittal. A spark of memory shown on his face before it melted into a look of horror. Molly snatched the document out of his hands and read through it, as best she could, her face getting more and more red. "You tried to give away our daughter for a bag of crisps, another pint, and some rubber duckies! It was one day after she was born, Arthur!"

"Now, Mollywobbles, -" placated the doomed man.

"Don't "Now, Mollywobbles," me, Arthur Weasley!" Shouted the redheaded woman, "You're just lucky you had to submit this to the Ministry before James could sign it! I don't even want to think of what Lily would have thought of this!"

Remus cut in, chuckling, "James confessed the next day. He had zero impulse control when he was drunk, but perfect memory. Lily made him sleep on the couch for a week."

"A fine idea if I've ever heard one," glowered Molly.

"Thank you, Remus," said Arthur dryly.

"Nor problem, Arthur!" Shot back the werewolf brightly, "Always happy to help!"

The redheaded man glared at the Marauder for a moment, before he turned back to his wife who simply "Harrumph'd" and left the kitchen, Ron's letter in hand. Shoulders sagging in defeat and heaving a heavy sigh, Arthur marched up the stairs after his wife.

As soon as the doors closed behind the doomed man, the remaining occupants once more broke down into laughter.

Celia once again composed herself and opened the letter in her hands and read.

Dear Mother Granger and Eric,

I'm not entirely sure what I'm supposed to write here. My letters home in the past have been nothing more than progress reports and information on "the enemy," or whatever passed for it that week. Of course, this summer proved that the two of you are a hundred times the parents mine could ever wish to be. An example of this was given earlier in the week when Harry received a Marriage Contract Proposal for me. They knew I was going to sign the consort contract, but they wanted to get something for me. I didn't exactly get warm and fuzzy feelings from realizing that I was nothing more than an expendable asset to my mother and father.

Harry declined the proposal, of course, which will upset my father to no end, but I just can't bring myself to care. His declination made me feel more wanted and cared about than anything mother and father have ever done. Ironical, no? He's become a great friend, I'm glad I convinced Tracey and Blaise to go to him for help instead of trying to handle things on our own.

Hermione was right once again. I do feel better after writing this letter to you. I think it is a practice I will continue. I even find myself looking forward to your response. I truly hope the two of you are doing well.

Love from,

Daphne

"She's such a sweet girl," said Celia after she finished reading, "I'm glad Hermione chose her for a partner."

"Me too, love," replied Eric, warmly.

Opening the next letter, she read,

Celia and Eric,

Things are so very different for me at Hogwarts this year. Not living in the Slytherin dorms is the biggest change, so far, though it is not unwelcome. It's nice having a place in the castle to relax and be myself. Which reminds me, thank you for providing that over the summer. I can easily say that the time we all spent with you, both before and after the attack, is the happiest I can ever remember being.

The other large change, and this an unwelcome one, is that we have been suddenly thrust into the limelight. For someone who kept to the shadows and remained unnoticed for the past five years, to have every eye suddenly on you when you enter a room is more than a little disconcerting. We get glared at a lot by the other Gryffindors when we sit at their table. Save Ginny, who is friendly, and the other sixth years, who mostly ignore us. But, as he promised, Harry is always there to protect us. It's amazing what a single green-eyed glare does to the other students. I'm very glad he's around.

Yours,

Blaise

"Blaise is warming up a bit more, now, don't you think?" Said Celia as she leaned her head on Eric's shoulder to read the letter that he was now opening.

Dearest Momma Granger and Eric,

How are the two of you holding up without six teenagers underfoot? Is it too boring for you? Things are going well here so far. No major mishaps, bar Harry getting two weeks detention with Snape for chucking Malfoy out of the window of the train. Harry is still maintaining that it was worth it. I tend to agree with him.

Speaking of Harry, he had an interesting morning today. First, he had to decline Ginny's Marriage Contract Proposal, personally. They were both absolutely mortified by the end of it. They were able to laugh it

off after, but I've never seen a face get as red as Ginny's. Hermione called it "the Weasley blush." Quite funny.

After he got done with that, he was set upon by four first year girls. Grace and her three friends that she met on the train wanted to tell Harry all about their week. The look of pure panic on his face was priceless. It's a shame the older Creevey boy wasn't around with his camera. Once he got them settled, though, he brought them up to our rooms and said that they'll always be welcome there, and then he listened to each of them. It was, by far, the most endearing thing I've ever seen from him, saving our lives included. He'll make a great father someday.

Anyway, I would love to hear about your week, so write back!

Love,

Tracey

"That boy is full of surprises, isn't he?" Asked Eric, amused.

"He is, but this isn't that surprising," replied Celia. She continued when Eric motioned for an explanation, "We both know that he's got a heart of gold. He just hasn't had a chance to show it, much."

The next letter, Eric guessed correctly from the elegant handwriting, was from Luna.

Dear Mummy and Daddy Granger,

Your plan to help Harry is working out well so far. Two of us are always in contact with him and he relaxes himself after initial contact much quicker, now. He very nearly had a breakthrough earlier this week, but the moment was interrupted and Harry retreated further behind his emotional walls. It won't be easy to bring him back out again. On the plus side, the Nargles seem to be keeping to themselves so far this year.

I haven't heard from Daddy yet, though I hope to soon. I miss him terribly.

I also miss your morning hugs and kisses, Mummy Granger. Still, life has been much less lonely than it has in the past, and for that I am grateful.

Luna

"Plan?" Asked Eric with a raised eyebrow.

"Never you mind, dear. I'm just trying to help him." Answered Celia, "Now, let's see what he has to say."

Mr. and Mrs. Granger

I hope everything has gone well for you this week and that everyone staying in my home is treating you well. If not, let me know and I will deal with them.

I imagine the girls already told you everything you could want to know about the week. Including the little incident with Malfoy on the train. All I'll say is that the git deserved it. Or, at least, he would have if I had let him talk long enough to insult and threaten us as usual. I did summon him back on when Hermione yelled at me.

Quidditch try-outs went well. Ron took a bit to get warmed up as Captain, but once he did, things went smoothly. I think we'll have a pretty good team this year. I wish I could get the two of you in to see it. I think Mr. Granger would enjoy it. Mrs. Granger would probably end up watching the game like Hermione; peaking through the fingers covering her eyes, or with her nails embedded in her cheeks.

Speaking of Hermione, as you know, her birthday is coming up in a couple of weeks, but I can't leave the castle to buy her a gift. I had filched one of the girl's catalogs over the summer for just such an occasion. I've included the page with the picture of what I want to give her. Do you think she'll like it? I want to do something special for her, as she's coming of age. I think I'll try and work something out with Daphne, since they are dating. If you think the gift would be good, let me know, and I'll have Dobby get the galleons for you from my vault. Thanks.

Yours truly,

Harry

The two adults gaped at the picture of the gift Harry was planning on giving Hermione. It was a teardrop necklace made of platinum with diamonds hanging in a row, starting at the collarbone and growing in size as they descended. The main stone was a brilliant sparkling blue Sapphire, Hermione's birthstone. It was large, but not overly so, and would hang just above the bushy haired girl's cleavage. All in all, it was a spectacularly beautiful, spectacularly expensive gift.

Eric blew out a low whistle, then said, "Well, he doesn't do anything by half, does he?"

Celia laughed and said, "No, no he doesn't. We should check to see if there are any typical coming of age gifts for wizards. We can get her a muggle gift next year, when she turns eighteen."

"Right, come on, love, let's go write some letters." Said Eric as he pulled his wife up the stairs to their room.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Padma Patil sat in an armchair in Ravenclaw tower, secluded from the rest of the room. Her shoes and socks were sitting neatly on the floor in front of her while her feet were tucked underneath her. Her dark hair hung down her back in a loose braid and she was continuously fighting to keep a few loose strands tucked behind her ear. Like most students from Ravenclaw often did, she had a large tome sitting open in front of her. Unlike most students, though, she wasn't reading it. Her brown eyes, while looking in the direction of the open book, were glassy and unfocused. It was a position and look that had become quite familiar to her Gryffindor twin sister, Parvati.

It had taken Padma's twin most of the summer to get her to open up and talk about what had kept the more studious and reserved of the two so preoccupied. Padma remembered that conversation well.

She was sitting alone on the balcony to her room in the Patil ancestral home in India. The sun was setting beautifully over the valley stretched out before her. Not that Padma would notice, lost in her thoughts as she was.

Parvati's loud declaration of "Alright, Pad, are you ready to talk about whatever it is that's bothering you yet?"

Padma started at the sound of her sister's irritated voice and immediately started denying, "I'm fine, Par, I'm just doing some reading."

"Reading. Right," said the other twin sarcastically, "first, you weren't even looking at the book. Second, you've been on the same page for the last hour and a half, and third, and most importantly, that book is upside down."

Caught out, Padma stared at the upside down book in her lap, shocked. Disgusted with herself for being caught so easily, she slammed the book closed and set it on the table next to her, then faced her amused sister.

"So, baby sister, what's up?" Parvati asked.

Padma rolled her eyes as she fired back the all-too-common retort, "Baby sister! You're only three minutes older than me!" She paused for a moment and continued more seriously, "Have you ever stopped to think about the future and your part in it?"

"Sure I do," answered Parvati, "but it doesn't keep me preoccupied for almost three months. What's got you so upset?"

The younger girl heaved a deep sigh and looked at her twin with sad eyes, "The war has started, sis. People are already starting to die. We're going to have to decide, and soon, what part we're going to play."

The Gryffindor stared at her sister with wide, shocked eyes, "We're just kids, Pad! What can they expect us to do?"

Padma laughed mirthlessly, "Open your eyes! Kids are the only ones who have done anything productive so far! Mostly, it's been Harry. We can't expect him to fight all by himself. It's not right that people expect him to fight at all, anyway. Like he has no choice in the matter."

Parvati grinned at her sister excitedly, "Look at you! Getting all worked up over Harry. You totally want him, don't you!?"

The younger twin blushed and said, "This isn't about that! Besides, even if I did, I'm on the outside of his dating pool looking in."

The gossip hungry girl cocked her head to the side and asked, "How do you figure? He's over Chang, Granger doesn't seem interested, and he continues to ignore the youngest Weasley, at least in that way. Who would he be interested in? Susan? Hannah? I don't think so. Besides I think Hannah is going for Neville."

The studious twin shook her head and said, "Who was the only non-Gryffindor to go to the Ministry with him?"

"Loony Lovegood?!?" Squawked Parvati in outrage.

"Don't call her that!" Snarled Padma, instantly silencing her twin. "Just because she's a little odd doesn't mean she should be ridiculed! That's just how the blood supremacists think. "Just because they have different ancestry, they are lesser beings than us." What do you think will happen to us if they win? We'll be nothing more than exotic whores to them."

"Easy there, Pad," said her sister, raising her hands in a placating manner, "I didn't mean anything by it. Where did this sudden defense of Lovegood come from anyway? You've never said anything about her before."

"You're right, I haven't," answered the still upset young woman, "and I'm ashamed. Just before term ended, Harry came into the Ravenclaw common room, called a house meeting, and tore into each and every one of us. Apparently, people had been stealing her

things since first year, and he ordered them to return every last item, and they did.”

“So,” asked the confused Gryffindor, “you didn't take any of her stuff, and I'm pretty sure you never teased her. Why would you feel so guilty?”

“Because I never did anything to stop them and I should have. Especially last year.” A look of utter self-loathing passed the pretty Ravenclaw's face as she spoke again, “I'm a bloody Prefect for Merlin's sake! I'm supposed to keep this stuff from happening, and I ignored it, and her, just like everyone else. Everyone except for Harry and his friends. Well, this year it stops. I'm going to help Harry fight in any way I can, and I'm going to do my job as a Prefect, no matter what Chang and her cronies think.”

Padma hadn't been able to keep that vow much as of yet in the term, as Luna did not live where people could taunt her or steal her possessions. She did reach out to the younger girl, though, hoping that she could show Luna that there was another person in the castle that she could trust. The beaming smile she received in response to the invitation to sit together during the opening feast and breakfast the next morning was sign of a good start. Now, she just had to follow through.

She was brought out of her thoughts by a shadow falling over her unread book. The Indian girl looked up, irritated, at the person standing over her, only to find the smiling face of Luna Lovegood.

“Oh! Luna! How are you? I didn't expect to see you in here,” exclaimed Padma as she returned Luna's smile.

“I'm doing well, Padma. I dropped by to collect you for the DA meeting today. You are still coming, right?” Luna asked, serenely.

“Of course, is it time already?” The older girl asked as she put on her shoes and socks.

"If you'd like. We would be a little early, if that's ok with you," replied the blonde as she glanced around the room, but somehow missing the glares being sent to her by some of the girls from her year.

Padma rose and led the other girl from the tower and toward the seventh floor corridor with the portrait of Barnabas the Barmy. She was slightly surprised when she felt the small, soft hand slip into her own, though she didn't let go. Luna, Padma noticed, had the tendency to grab the hand of whomever she was walking beside. At least, that's what the older girl had observed over the past week, besides, it wasn't an uncomfortable feeling at all.

The two girls nearly skipped the whole way to the Room of Requirement. The sixth year girl found Luna's airy enthusiasm to be contagious and was smiling widely as they approached the door that had already appeared in the normally blank wall. Padma pulled the other girl to a stop and turned to her with a serious look on her face.

"Luna, I need to apologize to you," the Indian girl said sorrowfully, "I'm sorry that I ignored you all these years and ignored the way the other members of our House treated you also."

Luna shook her head and said, with a voice that was falsely carefree, "You needn't apologize, Padma, I'm quite used to being ignored or looked down on."

Now the older girl looked angry, both at herself and the blonde's situation, "That's just it, though! You shouldn't be used to it, and you shouldn't be used to people taunting you or taking your things, either! And you won't have to be if I have anything to say about it!"

Blue, normally spacey eyes, focused intently onto Padma's brown eyes, seemingly searching for something. The Prefect was startled at the hardness in the protuberant eyes, but stared back unwaveringly. Whatever the younger girl was looking for, she must have found because her blue eyes softened and her lips spread into a soft and pretty, in Padma's opinion, smile. "Thank you, Padma. Shall we?" She said as she opened the door.

Flustered, the older girl nodded and entered, then froze at what she saw. The space itself was nothing impressive; a simple work-out room with padding on the floor and walls and weights off to one corner. What made the Indian girl freeze and blush to the roots of her hair was the fact that Harry was in the middle of the room, wearing only a pair of work-out shorts, slowly going through the movements of tai chi that he had learned over the summer. His body was glistening with sweat and the sixth year Ravenclaw had to work as hard as she could at not drooling. Luna hid a small smile as one of her theories had proven to be correct. Her plan now was to discuss with her other consorts how to use the information best.

Behind the two Ravenclaws, the rest of the DA members filtered in. Harry concentrated for a moment, and the weight set disappeared and chairs began popping up, facing him. He quickly towed himself off and threw a shirt back on before he greeted everyone as they came into the room. Padma noted that he couldn't meet some of the girl's eyes as he greeted them, including her and her twin. Hermione and Luna seemed to get a particular kick out of this.

All of the original group, save Marietta, filed in and sat down. Padma was surprised that Harry hadn't brought in the three Slytherins. She was sure he would want them to join, but for now, it seemed like it was the original members, or at least the ones that hadn't graduated yet.

The Ravenclaw Prefect chatted quietly with Hermione as the room filled and the DA members took their seats. Though she was participating in the conversation about Arithmancy, her attention was still drawn to the well muscled teen wizard greeting everyone with a smile as they walked in the door. Her eyes narrowed slightly when Susan Bones hugged an obviously surprised Harry, who then awkwardly submitted to it.

Both Hermione and Luna caught the glare and the older Consort raised a questioning eyebrow at the younger. The blonde had an amused Mona Lisa-esque smile on her face as she lightly shrugged one shoulder. All of which was missed by the dark haired witch. After glaring for half a moment longer, she turned back to the amused girls and continued the conversation.

“Good to see you back, Padma,” Harry said from behind her, making the Ravenclaw jump and blush.

“Thank you Harry,” replied the girl dryly, “I hadn't had my almost heart attack of the day yet.” Harry merely grinned at her and waited for her to calm herself. Her heart now keeping a normal, slow rhythm, she asked, “What were you doing before everyone got here?”

“I was just finishing up my work-out with some special exercises I learned over the summer.” The young man explained, “It really helps me relax and focus my mind as I cool down from the rest of my work-out.”

“Will you be teaching that to us?” The studious girl asked.

“Erm, not to the whole DA, no. I just don't think we'll have the time.” Harry buckled under the weight of Padma's disappointed face. “I'll see about adding you to the group I am teaching it to, though you'll have to get up extra early to join us.”

Padma perked up immediately and thanked Harry as she headed to her seat so they could get started. The green-eyed wizard's soft voice made her pause, though, and she turned to look at him. The blush on his face completely grabbed her attention as he spoke so only she could hear, “Could you and Parvati stay after the meeting? I need to speak to the both of you.”

Unsettled a bit by the apparent secrecy, but still nodding her assent, the younger Patil twin made her way to the seat that had been saved for her between Luna and her sister. She shook herself free of her introspection and turned her attention back to Harry, who had started to speak.

“Welcome back, everyone, I'm glad to see all of you here. We're not going to do any practical work today. This is more of an organizational meeting. I have some changes, one presented to me by the Headmaster, that we need to decide on.”

“Wait a minute, Potter,” started Zacharias Smith, incredulously, “are you actually asking us to choose between you and the Headmaster? Do you actually think anyone would choose you over the most powerful wizard in the world?”

Harry's face darkened in anger for a moment as a murmur ran through the group at that declaration, he snapped back, saying, “That's not what I'm asking at all, Smith. I'm saying that we don't have to do whatever he says. We can decide for ourselves.”

“But, but he's Dumbledore!” Exclaimed Ernie Macmillan. “Surely he knows best!” The young man from Hufflepuff shrank back into his seat when Harry turned his green eyed glare on him.

“Well, then, Ernie,” Harry said, almost growling, “if you think Dumbledore knows best, then why come here at all. Surely, since he appointed Snape, the greasy git, as Defense Professor, there would be no reason for us to even meet!” He sighed to himself and visibly reigned in his anger before he started again. “Look, I'm not asking you to turn your backs on the Headmaster or anything, I'm just asking you to think for yourselves and decide what you want to do. That's it.”

“What was the Headmaster's suggestion, Harry?” Asked Hermione, trying to get the meeting back on topic.

Smiling his thanks at Hermione, the leader of the group spoke again, “He wants us to open the group to any student who wants to join and have it be sponsored by a teacher, namely Snape.”

“What?!?” Ron almost shrieked, “he wants us to let the slimy snakes in here with us and have that greasy git hanging over our shoulders? No way!”

Harry wanted to stick his tongue out at Smith and Macmillan as the students all grumbled their disapproval, though he held it in and instead, said, “I actually agree with part of his proposal. Making this a school sponsored club would make things easier for us, but I wouldn't let Snape anywhere near this group. Professor McGonagall volunteered to sponsor the group if we asked. I do agree, however about letting more students in.”

Anthony Goldstein just snorted and said, "You just want to bring in those Slytherins you've been hanging around so much this year."

"I've heard that you moved into your own set of rooms with them and Hermione and Lovegood," said Justin Finch-Fletchley, "how'd you pull that one off?"

"I assure you, it's well within the school rules," said Hermione, "we made sure over the summer that we'd be able to get them out of their dorms legally."

Padma, who had been thinking about how Harry had been able to do that since the beginning of term, blurted out as she realized the answer, "Consorts, you've made them your Consorts, haven't you?"

Harry was just gaping at the girl, so Luna answered for him, "Yes, Hermione and I have also signed a Consort contract with Harry."

Dean just whistled, impressed, "Damn Harry, five girls...I think you're my hero." He retracted his statement quickly when he noticed Ginny glaring at him.

The leader of the group quickly gathered himself and interrupted before anything else embarrassing could be said, "Right, we're not here to talk about my personal life. Let's get back to the matter at hand. Do we want to make this an officially sanctioned club, open to other students, or do we keep it like it is and hide it from the Headmaster?"

"I think opening it up is a good idea, but I don't want to lose the close, informal nature of the meetings. It's really what helps us learn, here," answered Katie Bell.

"Perhaps if we met with just this group once a week, you could hold a meeting or two with the others. That way we wouldn't have to slow down for them," suggested Terry Boot.

"I like it, Terry, what do the rest of you say?" Asked Harry. The rest of the DA voiced their agreement to Terry's idea. "Right, I'll let

Dumbledore and McGonagall know later. Does anyone have any objections to me letting Tracey, Daphne, and Blaise into this group? Other than the fact that they're Slytherins?" Harry added as he saw Ron open his mouth angrily. No one did, so Harry thanked the group for coming and dismissed them.

As requested, Padma and Parvati stayed behind, confused due to Hermione and Luna giggling at them as they left.

"So," Parvati asked, "why did you want us here, Harry? Gonna have your wicked way with the two of us?"

Both Harry and Padma blushed at the older twins brazen attitude. Harry recovered first and tensely ran his hand through his hair before he took a deep breath and reached into his bag, pulling out three rolled up parchments. He set them on the table that appeared in front of him and motioned the two girls to stand in front of him. When they were in place, he picked up the the middle parchment and spoke in his "official voice." "Parvati and Padma Patil, in accordance with the wishes and beliefs of my Head of House, I must hereby decline the Marriage Contract Proposal for the both of you and all that it entails, making it null and void."

"He did it," said Parvati, shocked, "I can't believe he actually did it!"

"You knew about this?" Shrieked a mortified Padma.

"I was joking! Father was talking about submitting proposals to different wizards and when he got to the sixth wizard, Harry, I got a little upset and said that he might have more success pawning us off if he offered the both of us! I never thought he'd do it!" The older twin finished off plaintively. "I didn't even think he was serious about the proposals in the first place."

The younger twin buried her face in her hands and muttered, "I'm so embarrassed."

"Ern," said Harry, "we're not quite finished."

The two girls shot him identical wide eyed looks, before Parvati got a teasing gleam in her eye. "Oh, sure! First you ignore me during the Ball, now you're turning down my Marriage Contract. You really know how to make a girl feel special, Harry."

The young man blushed and looked at his feet for a moment, before glancing back up at the older girl with a contrite expression on his face, "I'm really sorry about that, Parvati. I was really a prat that evening, and you didn't deserve that. You too, Padma. I know it was Ron that ruined your evening, but I'm still sorry."

Before Padma could say that he was forgiven, her sister spoke up first, "I'll say you're forgiven on two conditions."

"Anything," said Harry.

"You should really know what you're agreeing to before you agree to it," said the Gryffindor girl smugly. She laughed when his face drained of all color, "Oh relax, it won't be that bad...this time."

Harry swallowed hard and said, "Alright, what do you want."

Parvati smirked and said, "A kiss now and a dance at the next opportunity, for the both of us."

"Parvati!" Padma hissed, indignant.

After deliberating a moment, Harry agreed with the stipulation that the kisses come after he declined the other two contracts, which he did right away.

As soon as he was done, the older girl jumped into his arms and stuck her tongue in his mouth. The young wizard was so surprised that he couldn't really respond properly. A few moments later, Parvati released the startled boy and looked at him appraisingly for a moment. "Hm," she said thoughtfully, "not bad. Needs some work, though, a girl likes to be kissed back. You're turn Pad."

Padma, who was looking slightly nervous, approached the teen wizard, who was also looking nervous. "You don't have to do this if you don't want to, you know. I know I'm not that great of a catch."

The younger twin was now standing only inches away from Harry and said, "No, I want to, and you're a great catch," with a small smile on her face. She tilted her head up slightly and kissed him softly and tenderly for a few short moments before breaking the kiss. She backed away slowly and maintained eye contact until Parvati said impatiently, "Come on, Pad, let's go. You still owe us dances, Harry."

Once they were out the door and down the hall a bit, Padma rounded on her sister. "You planned this somehow, didn't you? We both know that dad doesn't think highly enough of Harry to send him a proposal for one of us, let alone both of us."

"I am shocked and appalled that you would make such an accusation of me, little sister," said Parvati. At her sister's continued incredulous look, she relented. "Fine, I got Daddy to send all three proposals after I figured out that you fancied Harry. It's an "in" for you. It'll get him thinking about you. Plus," she finished with a smirk, "I got to kiss Harry."

Padma rolled her eyes and said, "He already has five Consorts, do you really think he'll be looking to add another?"

"He might if you make yourself irresistible to him." The Gryffindor said smugly. "And don't even try to pretend you didn't like kissing him, too!"

Finally, the Ravenclaw's demeanor broke, "It wasn't awful, I'll give you that," and with that the twins giggled as they walked through the castle.

Chapter 15:

Harry lay flat on his back, his arms and legs spread out around him. His emerald eyes glared up at the ceiling of the room he was in. He didn't try to stand yet, since the aches he could feel taking hold all over his body would surely protest any such movement. The supine young man could hear Flitwick saying something about taking a few moments to rest and querying whether Harry would like some water. The younger wizard could only groan a bit in response which elicited amused chuckles from the older man.

The teenager let his eyes glaze over a bit as he followed the lines of cracks in the ceiling he was staring at. His thoughts, though, were drifting back to the other tutoring sessions he had received that week. The first, with Professor McGonagall, went very well in Harry's opinion. They worked on conjuring objects quickly to get in the way of the killing curse and other more difficult to block spells. The stern Professor seemed impressed with the block of marble that Harry had been able to create. Just thinking of his Head of House's response was enough to cause his cheeks to warm slightly in embarrassment. He was also pleased that the older woman kept her promise to be a staff sponsor for the DA.

Thinking of the Defense club brought back the memories of the conversation he had with the Headmaster at the end of their training session.

Harry sat back in his chair after exiting Dumbledore's pensieve and considered all that he had just seen. The elderly man had just taken him on a journey through various memories centered around Tom Riddle and his rise to power. They saw how the evil man's parents lived, how he was raised in a Muggle Orphanage, taking the more aggressive side of the phrase "kill or be killed." How a teenaged Riddle gained followers as the handsome and charming Prince of Slytherin, and how his humanity was steadily burnt away over the years following his graduation from Hogwarts in the late forties.

Harry felt slightly nauseous at the similarities between his childhood and that of the future Dark Lord, which brought forth the question he asked the old man sitting across from him. "Sir, what was the point of

showing me all of this? Was it some kind of tale of caution? A “be careful or you could turn out like him”? Because, if it is, I resent the fact that you think I could even come close to being anything like that murdering monster.” The statement was finished in a tone of voice that was a bit harsher than the teen intended, but he couldn't help but be deeply offended at the notion of Dumbledore thinking Harry could or would turn dark.

“I meant no such thing, my boy, and I apologize if it appeared that way.” The old man replied with a twinkle in his blue eyes, “I simply wanted you to know as much as you could of Tom Riddle's past. Knowing how he thinks could give you an edge in your fight that could prove invaluable.”

“I don't think I can have much more insight into that monster's thought process, I've been in his bloody head.” Harry muttered, nodding his agreement to the Headmaster's explanation. Though, inside his head, the teen didn't trust it for a minute. There was never anything “simple” about Dumbledore's motives or actions.

“That is all I wished to cover with you this week, Harry. Next week we shall meet in the Room of Requirement to begin your practical lessons.” Said Dumbledore as he leaned back in his seat.

Harry thanked the old man and stood to leave. He moved slowly on purpose, knowing that he would be stopped before he left the room.

As expected, after a few steps towards the door, the blue eyed wizard called out, “I was wondering, Harry, if the DA has come to a decision about my suggestions.”

Harry smiled to himself at figuring out one of the Headmaster's tricks. “We have sir,” the young man responded, “we decided to open the club up to fourth years and above, and Professor McGonagall has already agreed to be our sponsor.”

The old man put on his best disapproving grandfather face before speaking a voice laced with disappointment, “I truly wish, my boy, that you could get over your childish animosity towards Professor Snape. I

believe his knowledge could be an asset to your group. I trust him implicitly, Harry. I don't understand why you can not."

The tight control on his emotions that Harry had been exerting since he trashed the office he was currently standing in slipped a bit at the old man's accusation. He snarled, "Stop trying to force us to work together! A peaceful existence is not something that is ever going to happen. And Professor McGonagall was who the members of the DA chose to be our sponsor. They have all suffered through too much of Snape's...don't interrupt me!" He yelled mid-sentence as Dumbledore tried to correct the teen wizard once more. The younger man continued, face red and fists balled at his side. "The students in the three houses, other than Slytherin, have suffered through too many years of his favoritism, hate, and unjust actions to ever trust the man. At all."

Not waiting for a response, the teenager turned and headed out the door of the office before he turned half way back to the old wizard. "At least my "childish animosity" is directed at someone who is still alive, and didn't begin until I was provoked," he said before slamming the door behind him.

He was brought out of his trance by the smiling, upside down face of Professor Flitwick appearing in his field of vision. "Are you still with me, Mr. Potter?" Queried the Charms Master.

"Hm? Oh! I'm sorry, sir," apologized Harry as his mind snapped back to the present, "I was just lost in some memories."

"Quite alright, quite alright," said Flitwick, "are you ready to discuss our duel?"

"Absolutely, sir," Harry replied as the two wizards sat in the comfortable chairs that appeared in the room. The younger wizard smiled and said, "Thanks, Dobby," to the air when a tea set appeared between them.

Once the two men were settled, tea in hand, the Professor began his lesson with a question, "In your opinion, what just happened?"

Harry grinned crookedly and said, "In my opinion, sir, you handed my arse to me."

Flitwick chuckled, "It's to be expected, Mr. Potter, I have been a dueling champion since before your parents were born, though you did make it more difficult for me than it has been in years. Now, how did I defeat you?"

"Well," Harry closed his eyes to focus on the memory as he spoke, "it started out as a normal duel, though you are much faster than I am. You were obviously not using your full arsenal of spells against me, seeing what my skill level was. Then you attacked fully, you apparated all over the place. I couldn't get a clear shot on you and eventually you landed enough hits to break me down."

"Brilliant deduction, Mr. Potter!" Exclaimed the half goblin. "You're spot on. Once I found out your power and skill levels, I used a technique that is best suited for an opponent more powerful, yet less refined. Now, how do you think you could counter my technique?"

"I'd start by being in a place with a decent anti-apparition ward," stated the student. "How were you able to get around that anyway?"

Flitwick smiled and said, "I had the room set up with the same parameters that we use to teach sixth years how to apparate. You can travel within the room all you want, but you can't enter or leave."

Harry nodded his understanding, then pursed his lips in thought before beginning his brainstorming again, "If you had used some sort of pattern to your jumps, that would be an easy defense, but even the timing of your apparitions changed. A series of wide area stunners might work, if they were timed right. Perhaps changing some of the environment with transfiguration, or erecting an anti-apparition ward, but you'd have to do that before the duel started."

The Ravenclaw Head was nodding with each statement, but stopped short in surprise at Harry's next question. "Is it possible to detect the target of the apparition before the wizard got there?"

Racking his brain for a moment, the Charms Professor replied, "You know, I don't think it's even been tried before. We can follow an apparition once it has already happened, but I can't say if it is possible to predict the destination before or during transit. Let's find out!"

They cleared the room of everything, but the two wizards. Harry sat himself in the middle of the room and closed his eyes. He focused on his magic and extended it outward, allowing it to feel what was going on around him.

The dark haired teen nodded his head when he was ready and Flitwick began slowly apparating in a circle around him. Each hop was extended as long as the older man could to help Harry sense what was going on. After a few moments, Harry's emerald eyes snapped open with an amazed look in them, "I can feel it! It's the weirdest thing; it's like an arm reaches out from your core and extends to where you want to end up. Then, it sucks you in and deposits you in that spot. There is quite a bit of residual energy left behind. I guess that's how apparition is tracked."

"Amazing!" Squeaked the miniature genius, "let's see what your sensory limits are."

For the next hour and a half, the two wizards worked at testing and perfecting Harry's new discovery until they were too tired and hungry to continue.

"I think that is good for today, Mr. Potter," said Flitwick, "we can continue this next week. It should give you a jump start in what Professor Dumbledore has planned for you."

"Oh?" Asked Harry.

"Absolutely. He's teaching you how to apparate." The Professor's grin made Harry chuckle as he waved and exited the room, calling out "Thanks again, Professor, see you next week."

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Daphne was sitting alone in the common room of their suites. It was quite late and, while the other girls had all gone to sleep, the redheaded Slytherin had too much on her mind for her to sleep. Her girlfriend's birthday was fast approaching and she didn't quite know what to do to celebrate. She had plenty of ideas, but the best all involved leaving the castle, and as there were no Hogsmeade visits yet, leaving was impossible.

She was pulled from her musings by the door to the hall opening and a visibly exhausted Harry stumbling through. Her violet eyes tracked him from over the back of the couch until he was halfway across the room. "You look like hell, Harry," the girl commented.

Before she could blink, she was staring at the red, glowing tip of a Holly and Phoenix feather wand as it pointed between her eyes. In years past, having the wand of the Boy-Who-Lived pointed at her face would have caused Daphne to secretly tremble in fear as she either blustered or bartered. Now, though, she merely rolled her eyes and said, "It's just me, Harry. Lower your wand."

"Daphne?" Harry asked as he blinked away his confusion. He then blushed slightly while tucking away his wand, and said "Sorry."

"Not a problem," said the Slytherin girl, waving away his apology, "it's my fault anyway. I know better than to startle you."

Harry walked around the couch and collapsed boneless into it next to one of his newer friends. Green eyes swept the room, then settled on the pajama-clad teen witch. "Everyone else go to bed?"

"Yeah, it is past midnight," said Daphne.

The young wizard shook his head and replied, "Bloody Snape, I think he's realized that he won't have any opportunity to taunt me after this week, so he's keeping me later to get in all the comments about my father and godfather he can. If it's so late, why are you still up? Don't you normally go to bed with Hermione?"

"I do," she conceded, "but I wasn't tired tonight. Too much on my mind."

Even though they had known each other for over three months, and she had considered him a friend for nearly that long, it still surprised her when those emerald eyes filled with concern on her behalf.

"What's got you so worried, Daph," asked Harry, "if you don't mind my asking, that is."

"No, I don't mind sharing with you; we're friends, right?" Her question was met with a nod and a smile. "I'm worrying about Hermione's birthday. It's just next week and she's coming of age, and I really want it to be special for her. I already have her gifts, but I wanted to do something nice. All of my best ideas involve leaving the castle."

"What's your best idea," pondered Harry.

"A night of dinner and dancing," replied Daphne firmly. "It's not something we can do together out in the open. So, I thought it would be a nice treat."

The wizard shrugged and said, "If you can't go out dancing, why not bring it here? We could get the other girls involved as well. I was already planning on cooking her favorite meal for the two of you, why don't we work on turning that into a "night out"?"

"Harry, that's brilliant!" Exclaimed the girl as she pulled him into a hug. "Oh, this will blow her away! We can turn the Room of Requirement into a restaurant and Luna could be the hostess and Blaise could be the waitress. Tracey has been taking piano lessons since she was five, hopefully she'll agree to play for us. Then, after dinner, we can dance the night away to the wireless." The redhead was practically swooning over the thought of such a romantic evening with her girlfriend.

Harry just grinned and said, "Glad I could help. Are you feeling better now?"

"Yes, thank you, I'm very relieved." Daphne replied as she settled into the couch next to him.

"Aren't you tired?" Harry asked as the young woman leaned into his side. "As you mentioned before, it's rather late."

"I'm still too worked up to try to sleep," the Slytherin replied, "but what about you? You looked half dead when you came in. Why aren't you going to bed?"

"Can't," sighed the wizard, "I have a few chapters to read for potions tomorrow, then I need to finish my Transfiguration essay."

Daphne smirked and said, "And why haven't you worked on this earlier?"

Harry rolled his eyes and snickered at the spot-on impression of his best friend. "Between class, training, tutoring, Quidditch, the DA, and detentions, I haven't exactly had an excess amount of time."

Concern laced his companion's voice as she spoke softly, "Be careful not to stretch yourself too thin, Harry. I don't want you to make yourself sick or have a breakdown."

The young man gasped and grabbed his heart, "Is this actual concern coming from the famed Slytherin Ice Queen?"

"Shove off, Potter," said Daphne as she playfully shoved the wizard next to her before she became serious once more and spoke quietly, "I hope you know that I do care about you. You've become far more to me than my would-be savior or my girlfriend's best friend. I hate the thought of losing you."

Harry's smile faltered and he spoke so softly that she had to strain to understand him. "It may be something you need to get used to, though."

The former Ice Queen wrapped her arms around the morose wizard's waist and pulled herself tightly to him. "I refuse to get used to it, Harry. We're going to do everything in our power to make sure you survive this war. Everything."

Unable to think of anything to say that would match the intensity in Daphne's voice, Harry simply said, "Good luck."

Harry let the moment end naturally, both teens breaking eye contact at the same time. "Are you gonna stay down here with me, or head up to your room?" Asked the wizard as he pulled his potions text from his bag.

"I'll stay here," answered the young woman, "keep you company."

"Thanks," he said as he got comfortable and opened his text and began to read. Daphne rested her head on his broad shoulder and continued to think about the plans for Hermione's birthday. Soon enough, though, the sounds of turning pages and Harry's quiet breathing lulled the young woman into a deep sleep.

Several hours later, Harry finally finished his homework and was ready for bed himself. He looked at the girl sleeping soundly on his shoulder and smiled a bit wistfully at the peaceful look on her beautiful face. The young man tenderly brushed several strands of red hair out of her face before gently shaking her shoulder to wake her.

"Mmm?" She said sleepily.

"Wake up, Daph, it's time to sleep," Harry said.

"Hm, no, comfy," was the barely intelligible reply. She snuggled deeper into his side and squeezed her arms a bit tighter while rubbing her cheek on his shoulder before she settled down to sleep once more. Giving up waking her as a bad job and desperately wanting to be in his own bed, Harry awkwardly turned on the couch and rearranged the young woman so he could stand and carry her in his arms.

Harry waved his hand at his bag and turned to climb the stairs, his bag bobbing along in the air behind him. The door to Hermione and Daphne's bedroom opened silently, admitting the wizard and the sleeping witch. He paused to look at the bed for a moment. Pale moonlight bathed the bed enough so that Harry could see Hermione

sleeping soundly on one half of the bed. As he used magic to pull back the covers and gently set the redhead in his arms on the bed, he noted just how beautiful his best friend had become.

The bushy haired girl was a lighter sleeper than her girlfriend because she woke somewhat at the movement on the bed. The Gryffindor girl blinked groggily and said in a raspy voice, "Harry?"

"Daphne just fell asleep downstairs, I'm just putting her to bed. Go back to sleep." Replied Harry quietly.

"Mm'kay," said Hermione as she pulled her lover into an embrace and immediately fell back to sleep.

Harry watched the two witches sleep for a few moments before he ghosted out of the room, shutting the door, silently, behind him.

Hermione's eyes popped open as soon as she heard the door close. She poked Daphne in the side, whispering, "Wake up you faker!"

The redhead mumbled something unintelligible and continued to sleep. "Oh come off it," said the brunette, "I know you're a light sleeper. There is no way you would have stayed awake through all of that jostling."

The Slytherin sighed and rolled towards the other teenager in the bed, "That always worked on my nannies. Why do you have to be so smart?"

Hermione grinned and said, "You wouldn't have me any other way, so stop complaining." Both girls laughed a bit, then turned serious again. Frightened violet eyes met concerned cinnamon, "Do you want to tell me what that was about down there?"

Ever the Slytherin, Daphne answered a question with a question, "What do you think you saw?"

Not amused with the diversionary tactic, Hermione responded in a voice that was less warm than she had intended. "I think I saw my girlfriend cuddled up in the arms of my best friend."

A great deal of the fear left the violet eyes once Daphne realized the plans for Hermione's birthday had not been discovered. "I was just keeping him company while he finished his homework and I fell asleep."

"And what was all that about faking sleep so he'd carry you up the stairs?" Inquired a visibly amused Gryffindor.

"It felt...nice...to be in his arms," replied the redhead.

Hermione looked steadily at the lightly blushing face of her lover, reading it almost as well as she could read Harry's. Suddenly, the light of understanding blossomed in her cinnamon eyes and she blurted out, "You're starting to fancy him, aren't you?"

Daphne groaned and covered her face with her pillow. Unperturbed, Hermione said with a smile, "Looks like Luna's not the only one falling for our dear Harry."

The pillow was torn away as the redhead looked at her girlfriend and cried out plaintively, "Falling for! Let's leave the whole idea of falling for alone." She narrowed her eyes at her bedmate. "You're one to talk, anyway."

"Oh pish," said Hermione as she embraced her love one more and settled in for sleep. "You've known how I feel about Harry since we met. I've not tried to hide it from you, at all. Whichever way you go, I'll still be here, loving you. Now, since I've solved your great mystery, let's go to sleep."

Daphne could do nothing but nod and acquiesce, whispering an "I love you," into brown, bushy hair.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

"Good morning Susan."

Startled, Susan jerked her head around from where she had been staring and saw who had greeted her. "Good morning, Hermione." Greeted the strawberry blonde quietly.

"What has you in the library this early on a Saturday morning?" Asked the bushy haired bookworm.

"Nothing in specific," replied Susan as she gestured at the open book in front of her, "just a bit of light reading."

"Right, that's what you could have been doing...why don't you tell me what you have actually been doing?" Urged the Gryffindor Prefect.

"You're not the only one who likes to read, Hermione," snapped the Hufflepuff, affronted.

Hermione had the decency to blush in embarrassment as she apologized, "I'm sorry Susan, I didn't mean to say it like that. I've just been here as long as you have and noticed that you haven't actually read of word of that book. You've been watching everyone else in the room, quite intently."

Since she was caught red handed, Susan decided to just tell the truth. "Honestly, I was doing a bit of people watching. Auntie Amelia taught me how to read a person's intentions just by their face after a pedophile tried to lure me away with some sweets with compulsion charms on them when I was five. I haven't had a lollipop since."

"Really! That's fascinating," gushed the brunette, impressed, "are you very good at it? What are you getting from the people in here? What do you look for?"

Smiling at the typical Hermione response to new information, Susan answered, "Well, I don't know exactly how good I am, but Auntie says that I'm better than most of her Aurors at it. I don't know if that means that I'm really good, or they are really bad."

“What you look for,” the witch instructed, “is mostly facial movements, the expression in the eyes, and body language. Pretty much everyone in here is fairly easy to read.”

“Well, what do you see now?” Hermione eagerly asked.

“Hm, most of the people in here are boring today,” replied Susan, “most simply concentrating on their work. A few, though, are interesting. Ernie, over there,” she said, pointing at the stacks, “is currently trying to find a way into Lisa Turpin's knickers, who is having none of it. Last week it was Mandy Brocklehurst.”

“Malfoy has been staring at you off and on with hate and a bit of anticipation. You should definitely watch out for him, he's planning something.” Continuing, the young woman pointed to another person in the library, “Marietta is sitting in the corner by herself, she's a very angry and bitter girl. Though, she is also very sad and lonely. Cho isn't hanging around her as much this year.”

“That's fascinating, Susan!” Exclaimed the Gryffindor, quietly, so as to not draw the attention of Madam Pince. “Can you do that with everyone?”

The strawberry blonde shook her head. “Some people are harder than others. There are several in the school that are close to impossible. Dumbledore and Snape from the teachers. I can't get anything from Harry or Luna, either.”

“Harry,” said Hermione, incredulous, “I can always tell what Harry is thinking from his face. It's like an open book.”

“He trusts you. Completely,” replied Susan, “he lets you see things he won't let anyone else see. I believe Luna is the same way.”

The other girl was about to say something in return when she watched Susan's face become a mask of sadness. She followed the Hufflepuff's eyes to the entrance of the library and watched as Hannah Abbot entering on the arm of Neville Longbottom. “I was wondering why you were in here alone, Susan. In years past it was quite a rarity seeing you apart from Hannah.”

The spurned girl snorted in derision, "Yeah, well, it's become pretty commonplace to see me by myself while those two are off somewhere together. It's been like that since August. I really don't begrudge them their relationship. I'm happy for them. I just get lonely, you know?"

Hermione pursed her lips in thought for a second before saying, "Yes, I know very well what it's like to be lonely. Why don't you come back to our rooms with me? We'd be glad to have you spend time with us."

Her offer was met with a shy smile from the lonely Hufflepuff and the two girls gathered their belongings and left the library.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

The rest of the week before Hermione's birthday passed quickly. Susan and Padma, who had been invited in by Luna the same day as Susan, spent more and more time in the Consort suites. They each had struck up a comfortable rapport with the other girls. Harry was taking a bit more time to open up, but he was working on it. It would be some time before he was comfortable enough to tell either of them the prophecy.

Harry's intense schedule did not let up on him even after his detentions with Professor Snape had ended. He merely substituted them with DA meetings and Quidditch practice. He still stayed up late every night finishing homework or reading. Now though, he wasn't alone. At least one of his consorts stayed in the common room with him, often sitting next to him just as Daphne had. He found that he came to quite enjoy the quiet time spent with each witch. Susan and Padma also joined in this tradition, using the fireplace to floo back to their own common rooms when Harry finally went to sleep.

The tension in the rest of the population of the school was rising quickly. Everyday more and more reports of attacks were appearing in the Daily Prophet. The Dark Mark was found glowing over at least one house every night. Occasionally, a jet black owl would deliver a black envelope to a student, letting them know that one of their family members had been killed. Harry felt a dagger of sadness and guilt

through his heart every time he saw one of the black owls, thinking that he was at least partly to blame for every death that happened, since he was not good enough to be the evil wizard, yet.

The lines between the houses were becoming more and more defined. One could barely walk down the hall without running into a nasty exchange of words between students, though the arguments rarely dealt with the war. There had been no violence as of yet, but most recognized the fact that it was only a matter of time.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Hermione sat with her eyes closed as Susan worked on taming her hair into something resembling elegant and Padma was in front of her, helping with her make-up. It was her birthday, approaching dinner time and she was getting ready for a formal meal, as requested by Harry. She assumed the other girls were helping Daphne in the same way somewhere else.

“Harry's gonna pass out from blood loss to the brain when he sees how good you look tonight.” Susan stated from behind the brunette, formerly bushy hair in her hands. “I bet you can't wait to see what he has planned.”

“Harry? Yeah, I'm sure he'll enjoy it, too.” Hermione said offhandedly, so relaxed that she didn't realize what she had said until she felt the young women around her pause in their tasks.

Susan always observed those around her subconsciously, reading their interactions with others and their body language to judge a situation. She hadn't really thought hard about what she had seen as she spent time with Harry and his Consorts, not until Hermione had spoken.

“You're not getting dolled up for Harry, tonight. It's all for Daphne!” The strawberry blonde was so stunned at the revelation that she continued speaking her thoughts out loud, “And Tracey and Blaise are together, too! What the hell is going on here? I thought you were all here for Harry? Is Luna in on this as well?”

The Hufflepuff came back to herself and looked into the panicked and pleading brown eyes of Hermione. "I'll tell you the truth, but please don't let it get out. It doesn't matter as much anymore, but it's still attention that none of us want. Harry most of all."

Adopting a waiting expression, Susan walked around and stood by Padma, who simply looked curious. The Gryffindor girl screwed up her courage and began speaking. She told them of the intertwined relationships, the threat to the Slytherins and Harry's offer of protection. She laid out the events of the summer in greater detail than they had heard already. She finished her tale by saying, "I hope you don't think less of us for this. I know the long-standing beliefs that our type of relationship is wrong, but, like Luna says, you can't help who your heart loves."

"I'm surprised at you, Hermione," the strawberry blonde stated, "you're just using Harry to get what you want! Did you even think what this would be doing to him?"

The brunette actually got angry at this, "Of course I thought about what this would be doing to Harry! I have spent the past five years thinking of what is happening to Harry. We're not just in this to get our jollies and be with our girlfriends. We're trying to help Harry. You don't know him as well, but he's been emotionally closed off since the death of his godfather. He puts on a good front, but everything you see from him is forced and fake. We're trying to get him to open up to us while at the same time trying to get him used to positive physical contact, which he has had surprisingly little of in his life. So don't tell me that I'm just using Harry!"

Instead of being chastised and meek, Susan simply stared at the irate brunette for a minute before saying, "Fine, I want in. I came into this year thinking that I would see if Harry would want to have a go at dating. That plan has been well and truly shot to hell, so now what I want is to help him as much as I can while getting to know the real Harry. Not the brave face he puts on for everyone else." Suddenly losing her bravado, the Hufflepuff stammered and blushed a bit, "Erm, I just, I don't think I'm into other girls, though. I mean, it's not something I've ever tried or thought about, so I can't be sure, but I just don't think I'd be into that kind of relationship."

Hermione smiled a bit and said, "We knew your intentions since the train ride. You wouldn't be here if we thought you were just after the Boy-Who-Lived, and if we didn't actually like you as a person. What you do with this chance at getting closer to Harry is up to you. Be honest with yourself, though. He isn't in any kind of mental or emotional state to deal with a serious relationship right now."

Susan nodded her understanding, then both girls faced the quiet Padma, who shrugged and said, "I'm pretty much the same as Susan, except I am a bit curious about the sexual aspect of everything. Magical Indian culture is much more relaxed about that kind of thing." She finished with a cute blush tinting her cheeks.

The brunette smiled once more and said, "Let's not worry about all that. We're all still getting to know one another. How about we just take it a day at a time and see where the situation takes us."

The girls agreed and finished getting Hermione ready for her special birthday dinner.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Luna stood outside the Room of Requirement wearing a plain white button down shirt and black skirt that hung down to her ankles. She wore her dark blonde hair in a braid down her back, showing off her long neck and the wand that was tucked behind her right ear. It was a simple outfit that made the young woman look beautiful. She smiled widely, her blue eyes sparkling as she watched the guest of honor approach.

Hermione had her hair done up in an elegant bun with some loose curls framing her face. Around her neck was the necklace that Harry had bought her and on her right wrist was the bracelet that she had received from her parents that morning. It matched Harry's necklace exactly and was absolutely stunning. The rest of her body was covered by the sexiest little black dress that Luna had ever seen. A gift from Tracey, Blaise and herself.

The acting hostess began her speech when the birthday girl stood in front of her. "Welcome, Miss Granger, your companion is waiting for you inside, shall I show you to your seat?"

Giggling a bit, Hermione said, "Thank you, Madam," and followed the blonde inside, where her breath caught in her throat. The Room of Requirement had been made into a beautiful candle-lit, dining room with a table for two set in the middle. Off to one side was a baby grand piano, where Tracey, who looked up and winked, was playing softly. Daphne stood by the table in a dress of her own. Navy blue and breath taking.

"Merlin, you're gorgeous," said an awed Daphne as Hermione approached and hugged the young woman tightly.

"You're not so bad yourself, love," replied Hermione as she kissed her lover deeply.

Luna cleared her throat softly to regain the attention of the two lovers, "If you would be seated, your waitress will be along shortly," then turned and walked back to where the kitchen was hidden. Moments later, Blaise, also dressed in a white shirt and black skirt appeared, asking for their drink orders.

"We'll have two glasses of your best wine," said Daphne, playing along with the theme of the evening, "and leave the bottle."

"Very well," said the blonde Slytherin, "would you like to order now, or do you need some time?"

Speaking for the both of them again, the redhead spoke, "We'll have the Duck a L'Orange, thank you." Hermione gasped in delight at the mention of her favorite meal.

The rest of dinner went swimmingly. The two diners sat and talked and flirted all evening while sipping wine and eating a delicious dinner. Hermione had been pleased and impressed that Harry had cooked it from scratch just for her. They followed dinner with a succulent chocolate cake for dessert and a romantic evening of dancing.

At the end of the evening, as she stood by her bed and slowly undressed her lover, the brunette said, "I can't believe that you all went to so much trouble for me. I can't thank you enough. This has been the best night of my life. I love you so much." As she shrugged her dress to the floor, revealing the lack of anything underneath, Daphne replied, "Let me show you how much I love you."

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Harry lay in a tangle of legs and arms, his body in a sea of sensation. The feeling of lips and hands exploring his body was a new one, but one that he knew he couldn't live without ever again. He blinked his eyes open and it was Hermione's lusty cinnamon eyes he saw as her head bobbed in his lap. He blinked again and it was Luna's pale blue eyes that looked down at him from her position straddling his head. He blinked a third time and he saw Blaise and Tracey snogging passionately in front of him.

He blinked a fourth time and he was staring into the lifeless yellow eyes of a great hairy beast with massive, razor sharp teeth and claws that looked as if a steel beam would cause no more resistance than a stick of butter. He bellowed out his victory as he stood over the body of the largest Nundu he had ever seen. His body was tired and bruised and his wand hung limply between his long, pale fingers. He wanted nothing more than to retreat, heal his wounds and rest for days, but he couldn't. He needed to obtain the prizes he had sought from the great beast before the scavengers that lived in the grassy African plain he stood in could tear the great beast apart.

First came the venom sacs located above each hollow tooth in the Nundu's mouth, which could be used to create some of the most deadly, painful, and debilitating poison the world had ever seen. Next came the eyes, which were powerful ingredients that Severus could use in some of the darkest potions ever created. Last, and most importantly, came the heart. Much like a dragon the Nundu's black heart contained a string that would serve as the core for the new wand that was to be made for him. A more powerful core there could never be than a heartstring from one of the darkest creatures known to wizardkind; one conquered by the wizard the wand was intended for.

Lord Voldemort laughed in sheer, psychotic joy. Potter would stand no chance against this wand.

The scream that erupted from Harry as the Dark Lord's joy sent a river of pain through his head had all of the girls charging into his room in the middle of the night. They were half way across the room when Harry sat up and vomited over the edge of his bed. Luna Evanescio'd the mess while Tracey conjured a glass, which was filled with water by Blaise, and handed to Harry by Daphne, who had ended up on the bed next to him. Hermione sat on his other side, rubbing his back in soothing circles.

"What was it Harry?" Asked the bushy haired girl.

"Voldemort," the young man rasped out between gulps of water, "he's in Africa, apparently. He just killed a Nundu and was rendering it down to potions ingredients. He is going to use the heartstring as a wand core, though. He was extremely happy."

"Should you tell Dumbledore?" Asked Tracey.

"Let me take care of that, Harry," said Haleigh from her frame that hung in Harry's room, "you stay and rest, I'll relay any messages between the two of you." She disappeared when the wizard nodded his agreement.

"Well, we know why he took Ollivander, now," said Blaise, "he must have convinced the old man to make him a new wand."

"The Headmaster thanked you for the information and asks that you get some rest, Harry," said Haleigh, in a voice that told the room that she agreed.

"They're right, Harry," said Tracey, "there's nothing you can do about it tonight. Would you like us to stay with you?"

The young man looked longingly at his companions before he came back to himself and shook his head no, "Thanks, though, you all need

to get your sleep. We have classes tomorrow, and I don't want you too tired to learn.”

“Tomorrow is Sunday, Harry. We don't have classes,” stated Luna. “You lay back down and we'll make ourselves comfortable”

Harry sighed and laid back down. “You don't have to stay. I'm probably going to be awake the rest of the night. I don't want you to lose sleep on my behalf.”

Hermione smiled kindly at him and said, “There isn't much we wouldn't do on your behalf, Harry. Let us take care of you.” The group arranged themselves on the bed. Harry's head was on Hermione's lap, who was stroking his hair. Daphne was curled into the other side of the brunette. Luna was curled into Harry's right side and Tracey and Blaise were using Harry's left side as a pillow. They were all asleep in moments. There were no nightmares for any of them.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

The offices at the Daily Prophet were quiet on the last night of September. It was quite late and only two people remained inside. A man was currently putting the finishing touches on the following morning's paper before he set the printing press to start churning out copies. He was eagerly anticipating the acts he was about to do with the young, blonde, impressionable Muggleborn secretary he had waiting for him in his office. Acts that, if he suggested them to his wife, would get him laughed at and kicked out of the bed for a month.

He hummed a jaunty tune as he started the printing press and swaggered his way up the stairs to his office. He paused and smirked at the sign on his office door that said, “Thurston Osgood, IV, Editor-in-Chief” just like he did every time he walked through the door.

The smirk quickly left his face, along with all of its color, as he saw what was waiting for him inside.

Lucius Malfoy sat in the chair behind the Editor's desk dressed in his black, hooded Death Eater robes, idly spinning a bone white mask around in his fingers. To the right, Bellatrix LeStrange was stretched

languidly on his sofa and poor Julie? Jessica? Jennifer? Whatever her name was seemed unimportant as the poor secretary was nothing more than a mass of trembling flesh, laying quivering in a pile on the floor in front of the sofa. A ring of blood was spreading ever further from her body.

The slow, evil smile that spread across Malfoy's face as he said, "Thurston, how pleasant to see you again" unnerved the Editor-in-Chief so much that he could only utter one word as he voided his bowels.

"Shit."

Chapter 16:

Dark Lord Potter?

Is Harry Potter going Dark?

By Rita Skeeter

Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, is the one who is supposedly chosen by prophecy to rid us of the threat of You-Know-Who. But, why is he doing it? Is it because he wants to usher in an era of peace? Or, is it more likely that he wants to usurp the current Dark Lord and begin a reign of terror all his own. Look at the facts and decide for yourselves, my fellow witches and wizards.

He is already violent by nature. Every year since he has entered Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry has ended with the Boy-Who-Lived in some kind of fight that he sought out.

He is an outcast. Instead of enjoying his celebrity like any normal sixteen year old wizard would, Mr. Potter can often be found off brooding by himself. Rarely, if ever, is he seen with anyone other than his tight group of friends.

He has already begun massing a Dark Army. Potter has begun recruiting his version of the Death Eaters last year, under the guise of an illegal Defense club. He also has already seemingly formed his inner circle, naming them his Consorts.

If these are not the actions of an up and coming Dark Wizard, I don't know what is. As always, I shall endeavor to investigate this more fully. Even if it means drawing the deadly glare of Mr. Potter.

Thump!

Thump!

Thump!

The students in the Great Hall were startled by the sound of flesh hitting wood echoing through the hall. When they looked around, they saw Harry hitting his head on the table in front of him, a copy of the Daily Prophet crumpled in his hands.

"It only took them until the second day of October to turn on me. I'm surprised they resisted that long." The Boy-Who-Lived's voice was muffled by his face being pressed against the table. The feeling of Susan's hand rubbing small circles on his back calmed the young man a bit, "It'll be alright, Harry. Surely people will see through this crap." Said the strawberry blonde.

"Are you daft, girl?" Blurted out Blaise, incredulously, "Did you not pay attention last year? Or how about Fourth year with the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Hell, even in Second year people believed whatever was fed to them, mostly by the Prophet. This year will be no different. If you're going to continue spending time with us, prepare to be an outcast, too."

"Gee, Blaise, tell us how you really feel," Padma said sarcastically, though she was smiling to take any sting out of her words, "don't hold anything back."

Blaise replied maturely by sticking her tongue out at the other girl.

"Do you think it will be as bad as last year?" Queried Tracey.

"It'll be worse," replied Daphne, "last year, people just thought Harry was trying to get attention. Now, they're going to think he's betraying them or some such rot. I think it's going to be very bad this year."

"And here I thought it would be a good day." Harry grumbled to his breakfast. "Silly me."

Chuckling, Daphne said, "Come on, sourpuss, walk us to class before you head to training."

The young wizard rolled his eyes and said, "Yes, dear," as he collected his things and offered the redhead an arm. Susan quickly jumped in and took hold of his other arm, barely beating Padma. The

strawberry blonde turned and smirked at the Indian girl, her blue eyes sparkling with humor. The Ravenclaw glowered good-naturedly, then smiled as she felt Luna hook arms with her.

Though the group laughed and joked the whole way to class, with Luna, Padma, and Susan breaking off for their own classes, there was an ominous feeling that they all felt beginning to settle over them. The next bit of bad news Harry got that day was from Moody; Shacklebolt, Tonks, and Lupin would no longer be able to help in his training, though Mad-eye would still show up every week. Kingsley was re-assigned to protect the Muggle Prime Minister and Tonks was sent to work undercover in Diagon and Knockturn Alleys. Remus was assigned, by Dumbledore, back to the werewolves now that the highly bigoted Umbridge was no longer a part of the Ministry. The former Master Auror, Moody, then proceeded to run a set of simulations that almost literally drove Harry into the ground.

The crappy day continued during the young man's lesson with Dumbledore. The teen wizard acted as professionally as he could, allowing no personal matters to be discussed. By the end of the lesson, the Headmaster was irritated at Harry's refusal to forgive, even though it did not affect his ability to learn. He had mastered apparation and could do it with only a whisper of sound.

Staring and whispering was what was on the menu for dinner that evening. Not even the announcement of a Hogsmeade weekend in a week and half could stifle the students' rude behavior. Eventually, Harry gave up eating and went to fly a bit before Quidditch practice. The practice itself was particularly brutal, as the captain wanted the Beaters to practice attacking the opposing team's Seeker. Harry's torso was almost entirely black and blue by the end and he was in the worst mood he had been in since term started, Snape's detentions included.

After helping Ron put away all of the equipment, as usual, and having a quick shower, the Boy-Who-Lived literally stomped the whole way back to his common room, earning a few glares from some snoozing portraits. His bad mood dissolved at the sight in front of him when he walked through his door.

All seven witches were sat in the common room wearing pajamas. Susan and Padma had taken to storing a couple of sets of pajamas in one of the spare rooms so they could get comfortable as they spent time there each night. The group was arranged around the couches and chairs so that each young woman was in physical contact with at least one other. Padma, squeezed comfortably next to Susan into one of the oversized chairs, was playing with Blaise's hair as the blonde Slytherin sat in front of the chair with her feet in her girlfriend's lap. Tracey was sitting in front of an empty space on the couch that was surrounded by Hermione and Luna. Daphne was laying head-to-toe next to Tracey with her feet in Hermione's lap on the couch and her head in Blaise's lap on the floor. The scene looked so beautiful, so comfortable and warm, so much like a true family should, that it touched a place in Harry's heart that he thought he had blocked completely off. He also felt a bit of sadness and isolation, like he was looking into a family room from outside a window.

The window shattered, though, when Luna noticed him and smiled widely, saying, "Welcome back, Harry, we saved you a spot," patting the empty space between her and Hermione.

The teen wizard stared for a moment in disbelief as Luna smiled and patted the cushion once more in invitation. The grateful look that appeared in his emerald eyes as he squeezed into the space provided spoke more to the girls than anything he could have said. It was the first real emotion they had seen from him in quite some time. Once the young man had settled into the couch, the group turned back to their conversations and books. Harry shrugged his shoulders, summoned his books and began working on his homework. A small, contented smile stayed on his lips for the rest of the night.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

The rest of the week leading up to the first Quidditch match of the year, Ravenclaw against Hufflepuff, saw Harry become a bit of a pariah, again, as the Daily Prophet continued its assault. In every paper there was at least one article saying that the Boy-Who-Lived was either turning dark or not doing enough to stop the current Dark Lord. Once they claimed both at the same time. To Harry, it felt just like second year all over again, when everyone thought he was the

Heir of Slytherin. He tried to keep his head down and ignore it, but he was still hurt when any first year he approached, apart from Grace and her friends, scattered in fear.

A perfect example of the escalating tensions between the Houses was the Quidditch game itself. Normally, when the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws face each other, the game is well-played with good sportsmanship and few penalties. The score would generally remain close and the play of the Seekers would decide the outcome. This section kinda bugs me a bit, but perhaps I've lost track of things a bit. Why would Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff be at each other's throats this much? It does make a great metaphor to explain Albus manipulations, but this seems extreme.

This game, however, was a five hour long test of wills between the two teams that, while any Gryffindor-Slytherin match was much more brutal, this was vastly out of character for these two houses. A large number of the shots taken by the Chasers for both teams were penalty shots, though by the end of the game, the Chasers were too injured to shoot properly. The Golden Snitch made an appearance four times throughout the match. The first three times the Seekers, Cho Chang for Ravenclaw and a third year Hufflepuff named Summerby, gave chase but lost sight of the elusive winged ball when they were either fouled violently or had to dodge a well aimed bludger. The only reason Cho was able to seal the Ravenclaw victory was because the damage to her face, two black eyes, a busted lip, and a severely broken nose, allowed her to see the Snitch as it appeared on the Hufflepuff Seeker's right side, where his eye had swollen shut.

"And Chang has caught the Snitch!" Shouted Colin Creevey, from his spot next to Professor McGonagall, where he was trying out to become the official Quidditch announcer. "Ravenclaw wins! 750 to 620! All of the players are dropping quickly to the ground to congratulate...No, no, they're just falling out of the sky. I don't blame them! That game was brutal. Erm, Professor, I, uh, I think they need help."

As all of the Heads of House descended on the injured students, Colin signed off, saying, "Well, that's it for today, everyone. We've got Gryffindor/Slytherin at the end of the month. Though, I can't imagine

that will be any less of a bloodbath than this was. Especially with how those slimy Snakes normally play.”

“CREEVEY!” Shouted McGonagall from the field where she and the Headmaster were conjuring stretchers and Flitwick was enchanting them to float to the hospital wing. Professor Sprout was carefully helping each student onto their stretcher and Professor Snape was stalking off to make sure there was no rule breaking as the rest of the students exited the stands and headed toward the castle.

“Whoops! Sorry Professor!” Squeaked the eldest Creevey boy as he canceled his Sonorus charm and left the box.

The high level of aggression did not end when the Quidditch game did. In the time it took the students to go from the stands to the entrance hall, four fights broke out. They were broken up by the remaining teachers and the Prefects, Hermione and Padma included. A fifth was almost started when Draco couldn't help himself and started mouthing off at Harry and his Consorts.

“Can't you go anywhere without your whores Potty?” Sneered the blonde Slytherin, the sound of his voice made Harry's hands clench into fists and his eyes darken in rage. “How much do you think it would take for them to switch to someone who knows how to use them right.”

The Boy-Who-Lived was about to turn and let his fists speak for him when a firm hand on his elbow held him back. His posture relaxed as he heard Tracey hiss in his ear, “Don't do anything, Harry. Snape is definitely around here somewhere, waiting for you to react. Just relax, they're just words.”

“He called you whores Tracey,” Harry snarled back quietly, “I can't let that stand.”

“Thank you, Harry,” said the Slytherin girl, “but defend our honor later. It will mean nothing if you get detention in our name.”

Their attention were drawn back to Malfoy and his cronies by the nasally voice of Pansy Parkinson. "He probably has them wipe his arse clean whenever he goes to the loo."

"Oh, is that what Draco has you do, Pansy?" Tracey shot back, smirking when the other girl blushed a bit. "No, I wouldn't think Dracy-poo would have you wipe his arse. He probably has you eat out of it with a silver spoon."

"Shut up NO NAME!" Snarled Parkinson, going for the low blow.

A look of hurt flashed across the face of the former Davis before she covered it up quickly with her icy mask, though Harry caught it. Just as Harry's raven-haired Consort was about to utter a scathing reply, the oily voice of Professor Snape interrupted. "Is there a problem here Miss...Marie?"

Harry could feel Tracey tensing next to him as her lack of a House name was used against her even more and decided to do something about it. He completely ignored the greasy Potions Master and turned to his friend and said, "Potter or Black?"

"What?" Asked Tracey, completely confused.

"Part of the contract that you signed to become my Consort stated that, if you wish, you could take on the name of Potter or Black." The young wizard blushed heavily and said, "I'm sorry, but I-er, I forgot about that until just now. So, which will it be? Tracey Marie Potter or Tracey Marie Black? They each have a nice sound to them."

The young woman could only stare dumbly at Harry for a long moment before her brain could function properly again. She glanced around at the faces of her friends and enemies that surrounded her, the shock in Malfoy and Parkinson's faces, the sheer joy and compassion in Blaise, Daphne, Susan, and Luna's faces, and the smug look in Harry's face finally brought her fully back to her senses and she made a choice.

"Potter, I think, would work best," she said, knowing that it would grate on Snape's nerves to have to utter that name even more often.

“Very well, you shall now be called Tracey Marie Potter and will carry with you the rights and responsibilities of any who go by the name of Potter.” There was a small flash of white light showing that the declaration was sealed in magic. Finally, after a month of waiting, Tracey felt whole again. And she couldn't have been happier. She was practically skipping, still holding onto Harry's arm with a smile that made her face even more radiant than it normally was.

Snape, though, could not have been angrier. Fairly snarling, “Everyone get back into the castle. Now!” before he turned and left with an impressive swirl of his robes.

Draco opened his mouth to say something that would undoubtedly, to him, be both witty and scathing, but before he could say anything Harry lifted his nose in the air and said, in a perfect imitation of the Malfoy scion, “You'll get yours Malfoy!” He then turned with a swirl of his robes, just as impressively as Professor Snape, and stalked off, his Consorts all laughing and walking with him. They didn't see the lovely shade of red that the blonde Slytherin's face turned.

The next morning, Harry was relaxing in his common room after his work-out. He was sprawled out on a couch, eyes closed, just enjoying the quiet of the room. His relaxation was interrupted by a weight suddenly landing on his stomach. His eyes popped open with an “oof!” escaping his lips. The surprised young man was greeted by the sight of an obviously elated Luna straddling his stomach, a piece of parchment clutched tightly in her right hand.

“Hello, Harry, how are you doing today?” Asked Luna from her perch on the young man's stomach. She cut him off as he opened his mouth to answer her, “Oh, I'm doing quite well, thank you. I got a letter from Daddy! He's back home, finally!” The blonde's eyes seemed to light up in joy at the thought of having her father back. He obviously meant the world to her.

Glistening blue eyes turned back on Harry and the next statement to flow from the glossy pink lips caused the wizard to freeze as if petrified and have all color drain from his face. “Daddy's going to be in Hogsmeade this weekend! He said he wants to, how did he say it?

Oh, yes, he wants to “meet the man that usurped his daughter’s affection.” He can be so silly at times. I’m going to go write him and say we’ll meet him for lunch at the Three Broomsticks. Bye Harry.” Not waiting for a response, the fifth year girl hopped off of Harry’s chest and scampered up to her room.

Meanwhile, Harry didn’t move and had a look of terror on his face. “Trolls? No problem. Acromantulas? Pish posh. Dark Lords? No reason to fear.” Said Hermione with a smirk on her face. “A girl’s father, though, that has you shaking in fear. Honestly, Harry.”

The teen wizard groaned as the room filled with girly laughter. “I think I can hear your eyes rolling, Hermione,” said Harry, as he gave up and started laughing as well.

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At the same time that Luna was happily writing her father back, four other students were detaching their own missives from the legs of four nondescript owls. If someone had compared these four letters to each other, they would struggle to find many differences. Each was a letter from a parent requesting a status report on the student’s marks this term in a cold, formal manner. Each also contained, though not in the same place, a smudge of ink somewhere on the parchment.

Two of the owls had delivered their letters in the Great Hall during lunch. The two students, sitting at separate tables and not knowing each other at all, waited to exit the Hall with their friends. They each disappeared into their respective dormitory bedroom, pulled out their potions knife and pricked their thumb with it. They pressed the drop of blood into the ink smudge that was on the parchment causing the writing to shimmer and change, revealing a hidden message. Each message read the same; “Your mission remains unchanged. Do NOT let yourself be discovered.”

The third message was delivered to a student who was sitting alone by the lake. This hidden message read differently, though. “You are now active. Proceed with the mission as planned. Your first package will be delivered to Hogsmeade drop point B this saturday. Remain

anonymous at all costs.” Smirking in anticipation, the student burned the note like they had been taught to do.

The final letter was delivered to the library. The recipient was startled out of reading the hidden message by a familiar voice, “Hey Blaise, what are you reading, love?”

“Hm? Oh, nothing, Tracey,” replied Blaise as she stuffed the letter into her bag, “just a letter from dear old dad.”

“What did he want?” Asked the raven-haired Slytherin.

“Same old, same old,” answered the blonde with an air of indifference, “just wants me to take up the family business, or he'll disown me.”

Tracey smiled brightly and said, “That's not such a great threat anymore, is it? At least, not now that we've got Harry.”

“No, I guess it isn't,” muttered Blaise as she shot an anxious look at the note in her bag.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

“Thank you, Sybill, for that delightful reading,” said Headmaster Dumbledore from his position at the front of the Faculty Room, “I'm sure we all appreciate your warning as to how we are all going to die at breakfast tomorrow.” He dutifully ignored the inelegant snort coming from his Deputy.

“Now, onto the last item on the agenda before we adjourn.” He paused as he noticed the slightly shimmering outline of a person who was disillusioned. The old man fixed his glasses and silently activated the Charm on them that allowed him to see through such things. His speech continued when he confirmed that the unseen figure was Alastor Moody. “I'm sure it is obvious to all of you that the tension the students are feeling is growing quite rapidly. We need to do something to curtail this before someone gets truly injured.”

“And what do you call eight students spending the night in my Hospital after a Quidditch match, Albus?” Asked a highly offended Madam Pomfrey.

“My apologies, Poppy,” replied the Headmaster smoothly, “I stand corrected. Still, the problem remains. We need a way to ease the tensions that have been caused by this war. I spoke with young Mr. Potter at the beginning of term and he provided some ideas that might help.

“The first being a communal common room for students of all Houses.”

“While that would have been a good idea in a different time, Albus, it is hardly practical now.” Said Professor Septima Vector, the Arithmancy instructor. “All a communal common room would do now is to give the students a place to get into fights. Even if there were a teacher present at all times, which we don't have the time for, it would just be too much to handle.”

“Valid points, Septima, are there any others who would agree with Professor Vector?” Most of the staff raised their hands at this, shooting down the idea. “Very well, perhaps we can bring this back up when things have quieted some. The next thought would be to have another Yule Ball. The dance we held for the Triwizard Tournament was very successful and could provide a way for the students to, as they say, “Blow off some steam,” and depending on how well it turns out, we could schedule more throughout the year. Any dissenters?” Only Mr. Filch raised his hand, though he was mostly ignored by the other staff members. The old caretaker rarely voted yes for anything other than stricter rules and more leniency for punishments, both of which only occurred under Delores Umbridge's reign of terror.

“Excellent. I shall announce the Yule Ball shortly and we can add in another Hogsmeade visit for students to acquire the appropriate attire. That is all I had for this evening, you may all return to your homes to enjoy the rest of your Wednesday evening. If Professors Snape, McGonagall, and Flitwick remain behind, though. Thank you.”

The old man waited patiently as the room emptied apart from himself, the three Professors and Alastor Moody.

“Ah, Alastor, welcome,” Dumbledore greeted jovially, “how are you this fine evening, my friend?”

“I'm fine, Albus,” replied the retired Master Auror gruffly as his false eye scanned the room even as his wand waved, protecting the room from eavesdroppers, “can we get on with it, then? My shift at Headquarters starts soon.”

“Very well, on to business,” stated the bearded old man, “I have requested your presence tonight so that I might get an update on young Mr. Potter's progress.”

“If we are discussing Potter's progress, Albus,” said Professor McGonagall in a brisk tone, “then why is Severus here? He has had no interaction with Harry this year whatsoever. Apart from detentions, of course.”

Dumbledore gave his Deputy a disapproving look over his glasses. “I have invited Severus because he provides a unique perspective on Harry's training objectives.”

The Gryffindor Head of House glared at the Headmaster and said, in a dangerously affronted tone, “Are you suggesting, Albus, that Severus knows how to teach my subject better than I do?”

Blue eyes, losing their twinkle some, widened as the old man backtracked quickly, “Now, Minerva,” the old man said in his best placating voice, “that is not what I meant at all. I was merely suggesting that Severus holds a perspective that we do not. His knowledge could truly prove invaluable to Harry.” Here, the old man's voice turned from a grandfather placating an upset child to a boss ordering his employee, “I really must insist that he stays. He will not share our secrets. I trust him, implicitly.”

“It's not our secrets I'm worried about!” Barked Minerva.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake!" Moody growled, breaking up any possible retorts. "Just tell him if Potter is doing well or not, Minnie, the stubborn old goat isn't going to give in on this one. Besides, Severus knows that if our secrets get leaked, I'll kill him myself." Rather than paling or showing any signs of fear, the Defense Professor merely sneered slightly at the threat.

Minerva glared for a moment longer with pursed lips, McGonagall gave in, somewhat, "Fine, Harry is doing exceptionally well. He is soaking up everything I can teach him. He decided not to try for the Animagus transformation, though."

"What techniques have you been teaching him, Minerva?" Asked the Stubborn Old Goat. The Transfiguration teacher merely glanced at Snape, crossed her arms over her chest and sat back in her chair, though her ramrod straight posture remained.

Before another argument could break out, Professor Flitwick spoke up, "Mr. Potter is doing quite well with me, also. Dueling him is great fun. I haven't been challenged like this in years." Filius gushed, then he too sat back in his chair with his arms crossed. The large grin on his face, though, showed his amusement.

Moody rolled his eyes at the antics of the two teachers before he started his assessment without waiting for Dumbledore, "He's learned all the curses and hexes that I'm willing to teach him. His physical strength and endurance is way up from where he was when he started, but he's plateaued in his situational training."

"In what way has he plateaued?" Asked Albus.

"He is still refusing to use deadly force. Actively, at least. If he is trapped or surprised he'll kill the attacker out of instinct. But then he loses the next round because he gets so wrapped up in the guilt over possibly taking a life."

"I don't see it as a bad thing, Harry not wanting to kill freely," replied Dumbledore, his long fingers steepled in front of his bearded chin.

"You would if you want him to win!" Cried Mad-eye, "The Death Eaters are aiming to maim and kill, and Potter needs to meet them with equal or greater force! How is supposed to kill the Dark Lord if he won't use the right amount of deadly force?!"

"Harry will be able to do what is necessary at the right time," answered the Headmaster, "we must trust in that." After a short pause, he continued, "Very well, if there is nothing more, then I shall leave you to your evenings. Continue as you were with Mr. Potter. Goodnight."

Snape quickly caught up with Moody as the old Auror stumped his way out of the castle, the other staff heading in different directions.

"What do you want, Snape?" Snapped the old man as the Defense Professor matched his stride.

"I agree with you about Potter," Snape was still unable to say the name without some venom behind it, "if he is to stand any chance against the Dark Lord, he must be able to take a life without remorse."

Moody's false eye swiveled to focus on the greasy haired man, "You wouldn't bring this up if you didn't have a solution," said Mad-eye, "out with it."

"The boy puts too much of his heart into his fighting. We must separate him from that to make him truly effective. You show him several scenarios of what will happen to his companions if the Dark Lord were to win and I shall provide you a potion that will make the lesson...sink in."

The retired Auror was silent for the rest of the trip out of the wards, lost in thought. Snape glided along silently next to him.

"How long will this potion take to brew?" Moody asked, breaking the silence as he passed beyond the gates.

"Two weeks," was Snape's reply.

Mad-eye nodded once and said, "Start it," before Disapparating away.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Harry sat on a desk in the front of the classroom that had been set aside for him to use to teach the general Defense Club, fourth year and above. He was staring out at what should have been a sea of faces, eager to learn. Instead, he was staring at a sea of empty chairs. Not one student had shown up for this lesson. Not even the Gryffindors. The Daily Prophet had been so effective at destroying his reputation, again, that only the original DA members, and select first years, truly trusted him. They met on Sunday afternoons, which was why they were not currently present. The young wizard sighed deeply and stood to leave the room. The normal start time had passed over an hour earlier.

Emerald eyes shot to the door, as did the point of a Holly and Phoenix feather wand, when it opened. The wand lowered when Susan strolled into the classroom.

"Big turn-out tonight," she said with a grin on her face and a laugh in her voice.

Harry smiled and shook his head before asking, "What's up? You've not shown up for the general meeting before."

"No, I haven't, but Luna told me to come remind you to reject me," replied the Hufflepuff.

"Oh! Oh, right, I forgot all about yours. Might as well get it over with." The raven-haired wizard replied as he shuffled around in his bag and pulled out a couple rolls of parchment. "Let me just get my "official voice" ready," he said before clearing his throat dramatically.

"Susan Amelia?" Susan nodded her head, "Susan Amelia Bones, I, Harry James Potter, Head of House Potter and Head of House Black, do hereby reject all terms and conditions of the proposed marriage contract. Thus making said contract null and void."

"I accept your rejection on one condition," said Susan with a smirk, "a kiss."

"What is it with people wanting a kiss after I reject them? Shouldn't they want a kiss if I accept them?" Asked Harry, not saying no.

"Who else asked for a kiss after being rejected?" Queried the strawberry blonde as she slowly moved closer to the wizard.

"Parvati, Padma, and Lavender," Harry looked at the witch that was standing very close to him now and blinked in realization, "and you already knew this, didn't you?"

Susan blushed some and said, "I did. Parvati couldn't help but boast to Lavender at having kissed you, so Lavender had to try as well. Now it's my turn!"

Harry glared at the girl for a moment, but then relented, saying, "Fine, I guess I can give you a kiss since you were so good about me rejecting you."

"You're so kind," retorted Susan sarcastically. She slowly slid her hands up Harry's arms and around his neck while pressing every bit of her voluptuous body into his. Their lips pressed together slowly, sweetly and held for a few moments. Harry, not wanting to deepen the kiss and Susan, afraid to try. After a few very pleasant moments, the teen wizard pulled back and had a look in his eye that the girl in his arms couldn't read yet. It quickly clouded over, though, and Harry took several steps back.

"So," said Susan breathlessly, awkwardly, "what do I have to do to get more of that?" She could normally know what to say in any situation by reading the face of the person she was talking to, but Harry made that impossible.

"Listen, Susan," started the wizard as he scratched the back of his head nervously, "I really like how close we have become over the past couple of weeks. You're a great friend. And, I'll admit, the kiss was nice. Really, nice. But I can't go any further right now. With anyone. I just...I'm sorry. Excuse me."

Susan watched as the object of her affections scurried quickly out of the room. Far from being devastated, the girl had a small smile on her face. She spoke to the empty room, "I can wait Harry, you're worth it...Damn, what a kiss." The girl touched her fingers to her lips, then grinned and sauntered out of the room to go rejoin her newest friends in Harry's suite.

Chapter 17:

Xenophilus Lovegood sat at a table towards the back of the Three Broomsticks. He was sipping at the Butterbeer that had been sitting in front of him for the past hour while he waited for his daughter to show up. His pale blue eyes were constantly sweeping the room, taking in everything but never staying in the same spot for long. It was approaching lunchtime, so the Hogsmeade pub was already busy. Patrons of all ages, shapes, and sizes were constantly bustling around the room, making it difficult to keep track of any single person. Which is why Xeno missed the glassy eyed man walk into the loo with a brown box tucked securely under his arm.

However, he did not miss when a group of teenagers filtered through the entrance. The first was a young witch with shoulder length blood red hair and violet eyes. She and the two young women that followed her, a blonde with straight hair that hung past her shoulder blades and the other with raven hair cut to just below her jaw line, had green and silver scarves on, indicating they were in Slytherin House. From the description that Luna gave him in her most recent letter, Xeno guessed that they were Daphne, Blaise, and Tracey. The three were laughing at something the dark haired, olive skinned Ravenclaw, judging by her own scarf, had just said. "Padma Patil, if I'm not mistaken," thought Luna's father, "and that strawberry blonde I recognize as Amelia's niece, Susan."

His attention was riveted to the next trio of teens to walk into the room. The first was Hermione Granger, recognizing her bushy, brunette locks and intelligent, cinnamon eyes. Xeno took a moment to study the young man standing between Hermione and his daughter. He was easily recognizable as Harry Potter. His messy, raven colored hair, shining emerald eyes hidden by round glasses, and lightning bolt shaped scar on his forehead made him stand out. The rest of him, though, did not match the commonly accepted description of the young man. Instead of a small, scrawny boy stood a moderately tall, incredibly muscular young man with an air of power about him that, if it weren't for the fidgeting nervousness that seemed to have gripped him, would make Harry a truly menacing sight. The older blonde man found it both curious and impressive that the Potter heir could pay

perfect attention to the seven witches around him and continuously scan his surroundings at the same time.

Finally, Mr. Lovegood looked at his daughter and his heart ached at the beautiful young woman that she was becoming. She had grown so much in the almost full year since he had seen her last that she was now the spitting image of her mother. He watched his little girl interact with her new friends for a moment before he stood up and waved to get their attention. Xeno was astounded at the changes in his daughter's personality. It had been quite some time since he had seen such an openly happy smile on her face. Most of the time she would wear shy smiles or small, blushing grins when she was happy. Of course, the bright smile she had now practically glowed when she spotted her father waving across the room.

"Daddy!" She shrieked as she sprinted across the crowded room and into Mr. Lovegood's open arms.

"Hello, snowflake," murmured Xeno into his daughter's blonde hair as he hugged her tight, "I missed you, dearly."

"Me too, daddy, me too," Luna replied with a small sniffle as she tried not to cry. By this time, the rest of the group had slowly made their way over to the reunited family. Luna turned around, but remained in her father's embrace and introduced all of her friends, each giving a polite "hello" in response.

Xeno cleared his throat, but made no move to stop hugging his daughter, and said, "Xenophilus Lovegood. It's a great pleasure to meet so many of my Luna's friends. Won't you join us for a spot of lunch?"

Though the atmosphere around the table was light, two sets of eyes never stopped surveying their surroundings. Pale blue met emerald green for a moment and, for that moment, each man understood they were after the same thing; the safety and happiness of the young women sharing the table with them. The meal finished and the conversation quieted when Mr. Lovegood said, "I was wondering, Ms. Granger, if you could send my thanks to your parents for allowing my Luna to stay with you this summer. I am greatly in your debt."

"Nonsense," replied Hermione, smiling warmly at the blonde girl, "it was no problem, and I can assure you that having Luna with us was an absolute pleasure. I wouldn't give it up for anything."

"Nevertheless," replied Xeno, "it was not something you had to do and I am grateful." He turned his grateful gaze towards Harry and spoke again. "You, Mr. Potter, I have to thank even more. You saved my Luna when Ms. Granger's house was attacked. I can never repay you or thank you enough for rescuing my little Snowflake. My world would be lost without her."

Still uncomfortable with praise, Harry blushed and dropped his gaze to the table, then shrugged as he muttered, "Harry, sir, and anyone would have done the same."

The blonde man smiled kindly at the embarrassed teen and said, "I don't believe that, Harry, and I don't think you do, either. But, as I can tell you are embarrassed by this, I'll let it go. Of course, this brings up another topic; I doubt an aspiring Dark Lord would be too shy about anything."

"I didn't think you would put so much stock in what the Prophet said, Mr. Lovegood," said Daphne, defensively.

Xeno laughed jovially and replied, "It's always good to see what the competition is doing. Believing it is something else entirely." Hermione found this statement particularly amusing, coming from the editor of the paper that wrote about Snorkacks, Stubby Boardman, and Rotfang Conspiracies.

"No," the older man continued, "I know what the Prophet is doing and I know why; Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix LeStrange paid the Prophet offices a visit and Thurston Osgood is a coward above anything else."

"Damn," said Susan, softly, "that was a smart move on their part. They got an instant propaganda machine with very little risk. I doubt they even had to bribe him. And with the way the wizarding people take the Prophet as gospel, our position has become that much more difficult."

"That would be true," countered Mr. Lovegood, "if there weren't an opposing voice. This is one of the reasons I wanted to meet you, Harry. I wanted to be sure of your character before I put my paper behind you, and now I am. You are everything my daughter has said you are and I would be glad to support you."

Harry and the others, bar Luna who was glowing with pride, gaped at the blonde man for a moment before the younger wizard spoke. "I can't ask you to do that, sir. It's just painting a target on your back. It's simply too much on my account."

"It is not your choice, Harry," said Luna's father, sternly, "I can see it, plain as day, that my daughter will be following you straight into the heart of this war. She has already followed you into battle. If you think I will not support my Luna in any way that I can, then you are sorely mistaken."

Properly chastised, Harry apologized, "I'm sorry, sir. You are right, of course. I can't stop you from doing what you think is right. I just...Luna already has to live without her mother. I don't want her to have to live without you as well. She means too much to me to see her in that kind of pain."

"It warms my heart to hear that my lovely daughter finally has friends that can see what a truly special person she is," said Xeno in a softer voice, "but that just hardens my resolve to help you in any way I can. This is the best way."

"Thank you for your support, sir," said Harry quietly, conceding the point. "The conversation paused as the young man studied Luna's face for a moment. Her blue eyes shone with both intense pride and deep worry at her father's decision. Everyone at the table knew how dangerous it was to verbally oppose the Dark Lord."

Seemingly coming to a decision, the emerald eyed wizard idly waved his wand to conjure a piece of paper and a muggle pencil. As he scribbled a message on the paper, without looking up, Harry said, "That is an interesting pin you have on your robes, sir. Could I have a closer look at it?"

Confused by the change in the young hero's demeanor, Xeno looked to his daughter for guidance. Luna smiled in relief as she realized what Harry was doing. She nodded at her father, indicating that he should do what the younger man asked. The blonde patriarch shrugged and handed the snowflake shaped pin, which his Luna had made for him when she was six, over to Harry.

As Xeno slid the pin over to Harry, the younger man slid the slip of paper over to Mr. Lovegood with the instructions to memorize what it said and then burn it. The blonde man soon had the phrase "Harry Potter's house is located at Number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London" memorized and the paper was turning to ash on the table in front of him. He then listened to Harry's instructions as the pin was returned to its owner, "I've turned your pin into an emergency portkey. All you have to do is touch your pin and say "Dog House" and you'll be delivered to my home. I'll let Dumbledore know and he'll tell his associates that are often there. That way they won't be surprised if you drop by."

"Thank you, Harry, I truly appreciate this," replied Xeno in a voice that showed he understood the gravity of the situation. "Now," he exclaimed, brightening up, "I believe the Headmaster has given you permission to spend the night with me, snowflake, so why don't you say goodbye to your friends and we can be off."

Luna smiled happily and enthusiastically hugged each of her friends, ending with Harry. "Be safe," he said, as she held him tightly, "we'll see you tomorrow."

"You too, Harry," said the small blonde, "I'll be back after dinner." With a final wave, the two Lovegoods turned and made their way out of the pub, nearly bumping into a tall, fifth year Ravenclaw boy with a brown box tucked under his arm.

"Well, ladies," said the emerald eyed wizard as he and his group also headed back outside, "where to?"

"Bookstore," answered six voices immediately. The young man merely rolled his eyes and led the way there.

The rest of the day passed quickly as the Hogwarts students ran from shop to shop, trying to spend as little time as possible in the cold, October air. The fact that they were in Northern Scotland was evidenced by the thick layer of snow that was on the ground.

Harry's group was making their way back toward the castle, when an argument ahead of them caught their attention. Colleen McCray was talking loudly and gesturing wildly at the brown box that was tucked securely under the arm of Katie Bell. The seventh-year Gryffindor Chaser was ignoring everything her rather irritated friend said. She simply stared forward as they walked.

"I don't understand why you won't tell me what's in the package, Katie! I don't even know where you got it! You were just suddenly walking around with a bloody box! Do you even know who it's from? Why are you acting so strangely? You could at least answer me, Katie!"

They were nearly at the doors to the school when Colleen gave up and tried to steal the box away from her friend. There was a brief struggle before the box came apart and a beautiful necklace fell to the ground. "Look what you've done!" Shouted Katie, ending her silence. "Can't I bloody well have one secret? No, don't touch that!"

Her warning came out too late, though, because Colleen's hand had already closed on the beautiful pearl necklace that was sitting on the ground. The reaction was immediate. The seventh year girl began floating up into the air, her arms and legs becoming rigid. Her body trembled for a moment before she let out a high pitched scream that would grab the attention of any close enough to hear it.

Her hair became frizzy and stuck out from her head as if she had been electrocuted as it turned neon pink. Her face became a dark purple and her clothes transfigured into the striped pajamas of a stereotypical jailhouse inmate and her hands turned red. A word, in neon green writing, appeared over and over on her face that said "Thief" and fireworks began shooting out of the frayed ends of her hair. The pyrotechnic display popped and fizzed around her head before it spelled out a message in flashing, flaming letters; "I tried to

steal from Weasley Wizarding Wheezes and was caught red handed!”

By this time, a rather large crowd had formed around the two seventh year Gryffindors that included several teachers and Argus Filch, who looked like he was going to have a stroke at the idea of anything from the Weasley twins entering the castle. Katie shook her head and strolled up to her nosey friend and said, “You couldn't just let things be. I'm dating George Weasley, and he sent me that necklace as a birthday present. I wanted to open my present by myself, first, before I showed anyone what it was.” She paused, sighed and said, “Let's get you to the Hospital Wing. Hopefully, Madam Pomfrey will be able to sort you out.”

Katie grabbed her floating friend by the foot, which was at head-level, and pulled her toward the hospital wing. The rather large crowd of students that had gathered followed them into the castle. No one noticed the glassy eyed fourth year Hufflepuff boy, carry a brown box into the castle, which had been passed to him by a Ravenclaw. As the rest of the students filed sedately into the Great Hall for dinner, the fourth year Hufflepuff was walking quickly up to the third floor, where he slipped into an unused classroom.

“Were you seen?” Asked a voice when the door closed.

“No,” replied the young boy in a monotone voice.

“Ha,” laughed the voice, “I knew this plan would work. Set the box down, boy.” As the Hufflepuff did as he was told, the voice mused, “It really would be easiest to kill you right now, but that would be too noticeable. I can't let you walk around under the Imperius, though. Finite.”

As soon as the boy was hit with the spell, his eyes cleared and he looked around the empty room in confusion until he settled on the other occupant of the room. “You!” The young boy squeaked as he started to tremble in fear.

“Yes. Me,” the owner of the voice drawled before they incanted, “Obliviate!”

Once again, the boy's eyes glazed over and he listened as his memory was replaced, "You were walking to the library when you heard a sound come from this room. When you checked there was nothing and you decided to continue to the library."

The third year shook his head to clear it and found himself standing in the hall outside the room. He looked at the door curiously for a moment before he shrugged and wandered off toward library.

Still inside the room, the speaker was carefully removing the lid of the box before the package was gently laid on its side. Three taps on the side of the box coaxed its contents out. Slowly, a long, needle-like head with a barbed bulb on the end and long antennae instead of eyes emerged. It was quickly followed by a long, thin body propelled by millions of hair-like legs that rolled along the magical insect's sides as it walked. The light brown body of the creature, once it was completely out of the box. Was close to fifty centimeters long. After vanishing the box, the perpetrator quickly left the room, knowing that the dangerous insect would attach itself to the first person it came across.

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"All right, out with it," said an irritated Harry. He was standing in front of the original DA members, staring out at them impatiently. He had been trying to teach them some of the transfiguration techniques Professor McGonagall had shown him. The looks he was receiving from the group through out the lesson had been distracting. There were looks ranging from open friendliness to outright dislike. Zacharias Smith was glaring worse than anyone else, though.

"What have I done that has half of you glaring at me?" He asked.

The silence was becoming uncomfortable until Smith finally blurted, "We're not here to become your version of the Death Eaters, Potter!"

"So," Harry said with a sigh, "that's what the Prophet is saying about me this week."

"The evidence is there for anyone to see, Potter," said Terry Boot, snootily.

"Oh, please," snapped Padma, "you couldn't follow an evidence trail by yourself to find your own arse, Terry. You're just going where the Prophet writers are leading you."

"The only thing missing," sneered Smith, "is the bloody marks on our arms. He has his inner circle, he has a way of contacting us secretly, he has a set of nasty charms in place to ensure our loyalty. He's even teaching us how to kill for him! Shall we start kneeling before the Great Harry Potter now, or do you want to wait until we graduate?"

As Zacharias spoke, the faces of some of the DA became more hostile. The room seemed to split down the middle as Harry spoke softly, "You are welcome to your opinion, Smith, however false it is. I was hoping that, after what we've been through in the past year, you lot would trust me just a little. Or at least more than that bloody paper. But, I guess not. You are all free to leave. I ask that you allow us to keep the charmed contracts active, if only for the protection of those who choose to stay."

"You aren't even going to try to refute any of this?" Asked a surprised and pensive Hannah Abbott.

Susan snorted derisively, startling the other witch. "He shouldn't have to, Hannah. He's done enough, more than enough, for all of us that he should have earned your trust by now."

The blonde Hufflepuff girl was so confused at the bitterness and hostility in her best friend's voice that she couldn't think of anything to say before Ernie MacMillan spoke, "What has he done for Hufflepuff House to earn our trust? Other than get Diggory killed, that is."

A shocked gasp ran through the group at this. Some of the students who were gathering to leave looked at Ernie with disapproval on their faces. The students who were standing by Harry, though, looked ready to kill. Harry himself stood completely still with an emotionless mask on his face. His only reaction was blink once, slowly, and breath deeply through his nose. Hermione and Susan, who was

surprised she could, easily read the deep pain Harry felt at the proclamation.

It was Neville who spoke first, more firmly than any had heard before, "It's time for everyone to decide. Either you are with Harry and you stay, or you aren't and you can let the door hit you in the arse on the way out."

Members, former now, began filing out of the Room of Requirement starting with Zacharias Smith. One of the last to leave was Justin Finch-Fletchley, who called out, "Come on, Hannah. We're leaving."

Hannah was standing in the middle of the room looking back and forth between those leaving and those staying, which included her boyfriend, Neville. A war of emotions playing over her face.

"Ah," said Susan, sarcastically, "the testing of the vaunted Hufflepuff loyalties. Do you choose your House or your boyfriend? Difficult."

This brought Hannah up short. Her decision made, she walked over to Harry's group saying, "Don't forget about my best friend." Justin scoffed and slammed the door behind him.

The strawberry blonde snorted and turned from her friend, saying, "You already did that."

Hannah looked at Susan with concern and hurt radiating from her eyes, saying, "What do you mean I've forgotten about my best friend? I haven't forgotten about you!"

As the long awaited confrontation between the two Hufflepuff sixth years started, Harry pulled the students who remained by his side towards the door. Every Gryffindor who had been in the group already, plus Luna and Padma had stayed. Once they were away from the arguing witches, Harry spoke, "Why don't we give them some space to work out their issues? We can meet some other time. Thank you all for standing by me. It means a lot."

"It was the right thing to do, Harry," answered a surprisingly serious Lavender, "we're with you the whole way."

Harry smiled at her and quietly led the group out, leaving the two feuding friends alone. He very much wanted to stay and give Susan his support and saw the same look on Neville's face regarding Hannah. He knew, though, that this had to be remedied by the two of them alone. Hermione grabbed Neville by the elbow and began whispering into his ear. The formerly pudgy boy's face went from worry to a resigned determination as he listened to the intelligent young woman. Harry closed the door behind him, hoping for the best.

While Harry was pulling the DA members out of the room, Susan continued her argument. "Oh please, Hannah, you've barely said three words to me all term! We haven't hung out just the two of us since we were attacked at my Auntie's house!"

"It's not like you've been around much, either!" Hannah fired back, shocked into a defensive mindset by the mixture of accusation, anger, and pain in her house mate's voice. "You're always hanging around in Harry's rooms."

"Don't try to put this on me, Han," Susan all but shrieked as tears started leaking out of her eyes and the pain of the past few months came through, "I wouldn't have been spending as much time with them as I do if you were around. For Merlin's sake! The only reason I'm with them now is because Hermione invited me in after finding me sulking in the library!"

"So, what," Hannah asked more snidely than she had meant, "do you want me to break up with Neville? Is that it? I have to choose between my best friend and my boyfriend?"

"Of course not, Hannah," Susan said sadly, "I'm happy for you. Neville's a great guy. I just...I miss you is all."

This, finally, broke through the blonde Hufflepuff's wall of defensiveness and she burst into tears. Susan was pulled into a tearful, yet still bone-crushing hug by the other girl as she said, "I'm so sorry. I've been a dreadful friend. I miss you, too, Sue. So much. I promise, if you give me another chance, I promise you I'll balance my

time better. I want you in my life, Sue, and I want you there as my best friend.”

By this time, Susan was crying and hugging Hannah back just as hard, relieved that she wouldn't have to give up her best friend. The two girls cried in their embrace for a few more minutes before they broke apart and cleaned themselves up. By mutual, unspoken, agreement, they decided to spend the remainder of the evening alone together to begin mending their friendship.

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The next morning at breakfast, Hannah joined Susan and the rest of Harry's group at the Gryffindor table with Neville. She was nervous that she would not be accepted by the group due to her hesitation the night before. Her worries proved unfounded, though, as Harry greeted them with a warm smile and a gesture to join them. As usual, the women surrounding Harry started speaking happily with each other, with Hannah being pulled into the conversation quickly. The emerald eyed wizard sat and ate quietly, a small smile present on his face as he happily listened to the topics being discussed. Occasionally he would interject his opinion or chat with Neville, but for the most part he was content to eat in silence.

About halfway through the meal, the sound of hundreds of fluttering wings filled the Great Hall, signifying the arrival of the mail. For the first time all term, an unfamiliar owl landed in front of Harry. The tawny owl held out the leg that had a copy of The Quibbler attached to it. Harry quickly paid the owl and unrolled his paper.

Daily Prophet Under Death Eater Control

by Xenophilius Lovegood, Editor-in-Chief

Imagine my surprise, returning from my extended trip abroad, to find the Daily Prophet once again attacking Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. The same paper that had spent the past year attempting to paint Mr. Potter as an unstable liar, only to be proved wrong by the boy himself, was now painting him a Dark Lord.

Naturally, I found myself asking why they would do this. The answer is You Know Who and his Death Eaters. My sources told me that last month, just before this latest smear campaign began, noted mass-murderer and Azkaban escapee Bellatrix LeStrange and fellow Death Eater Lucius Malfoy paid a visit to the offices of Thurston Osgood, IV Editor-in-Chief of the Daily Prophet. The two members of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's Inner Circle tortured Mr. Osgood's secretary to death and threatened the man himself if he did not comply. Seeing what direction the Daily Prophet has taken, Mr. Osgood has obviously complied.

Continued on page 2...

After reading the article that went on to beg the population of wizarding Britain to reconsider their stance on the Boy-Who-Lived, Harry set his paper down and looked at Luna. "I really hope your father knows what he's doing, here. This is going to bring a lot of unwanted attention onto him."

"He does," replied Luna, "but thank you, all the same, for giving him that portkey and access to your home."

"Anything for you, Luna," said Harry sincerely as they left for classes.

The follow-up article the next day in the Daily Prophet denying everything that the Quibbler claimed would start a heated war of words between the two papers. The battle would solidify the opinion of some that thought Harry was an up-and-coming Dark Lord while other would see the truth as shown by Xeno's paper. Overall, though, the people of the wizarding world would be forced to do something they were not used to; think for themselves.

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Blaise was alone in their common room as she paced nervously in front of the fire. It was her night to stay up with Harry and he was currently showering after a vigorous Quidditch practice held in the pouring rain. It was also the first time she would be alone with the wizard since she received her father's letter. The blonde Slytherin

was muttering to herself as she paced, trying to decide what to do and how to word her explanation.

“You know, pacing back and forth while muttering to yourself in the muggle world would cause people to think you were nutters,” said Harry from the bottom of the stairs, startling Blaise.

“The blonde turned and narrowed her eyes dangerously, but asked sweetly, “Are you calling me a Nutter, Mr. Potter?”

The emerald eyed wizard smirked and said, “If the shoe fits.”

“Isn't that a bit of the pot calling the kettle black?” Fired back Blaise with an arched eyebrow.

Harry's face was a mask of playful indignation, “Hey, just because I have an insane Dark Lord traipsing around in my head every once in a while doesn't mean I'm a nutter.”

At this, the two teens started laughing, long and hard. Once they had calmed enough to speak again, Harry asked, “What has you so worked up, Blaise? I don't think I've ever seen you like this.”

Letting out a deep sigh and with drooping shoulders, the blonde continued her pacing. She didn't say anything for a moment, but suddenly stopped, turned towards Harry and pulled a piece of well-worn parchment out of her pocket.

“This,” she explained, “is a letter from my father, ordering me to spy on you or else I get booted from the family...and probably much worse.”

Harry's intense stare flickered between the parchment and Blaise's face, while his own face remained unreadable. Finally, after several terrifying, for Blaise, minutes of silence, the raven-haired teen asked, “So, what do you want to do? How can I help you?”

“W-w-what?” Stuttered Blaise, “You aren't mad? You're not kicking me out? Why aren't you kicking me out? My father is asking me to betray you!”

"Why would I kick you out?" Asked Harry. "You haven't done anything, yet. You telling me about this shows that you aren't planning on betraying me. It's your father I'm angry at for putting you in this position. I'm not going to do anything you don't want me to, Blaise."

Relief flooded through the witch as she saw the sincerity in the young man's eyes. "Thank you, Harry." though obviously grateful, her voice was still a bit hysterical and only became increasingly so as she continued to speak. "But, what am I going to do? He'll disown me for sure! And once he's done that, nothing will stop him from coming after me with a vengeance! You don't know what he and my brothers are capable of!"

By the end of her rant, Blaise had worked herself up so much that Harry had to stand and grab hold of her shoulders to steady her. "Look at me," the wizard barked, surprising the young woman into silence, "I don't care what they are capable of, Blaise. I'm not going to let anything happen to you. And if they disown you, I have two perfectly good family names up for rent. You could join Tracey as a Potter, or you could be the first Black since Sirius. Whatever happens, know that I'll stick with you."

Ice blue eyes stared into emerald green for a moment before the blue filled with tears and Blaise did something she hadn't done with Harry before. She threw herself into his arms and buried her face in his neck in one of the most comforting hugs she had ever experienced. The awkward wizard patting the young witch's back for a while as she sobbed out her stress.

Finally, her tears and sniffles subsided and Blaise pulled her head from Harry's neck, but didn't relax her arms at all. This brought the teens' faces so close together that they each could feel the other's breath on their lips. The blonde Slytherin's mind was foggy from her emotional release, while Harry's mind was foggy from being a teenage boy having a gorgeous teenage girl wrapped around him so tightly.

Blaise was lost in feeling as she thought, "Merlin, I haven't felt like this since my first kiss with Tracey. TRACEY!!!!" The thought of her

girlfriend and how Harry was definitely not a girl, judging by the object poking her in the stomach, caused her to feel like ice had been dumped through her veins. She quickly jumped back while forcefully pushing the confused wizard away from her, causing him to land on the couch. She practically screamed, "Thanks Harry, I'll-uh, I'll..." then ran off to her shared room with Tracey. The teen wizard sat first in shock, then sadness, then anger at himself that he couldn't control his hormones when his friend needed him. "Bloody wonderful," he thought to himself, "just as I get her to trust me, I go and force myself on her. I doubt she'll even want to talk to me again. Tracey's going to kill me."

He would only be half-right. Blaise, in her confusion over her obviously strong attraction to Harry, a man, would slowly close herself off to the wizard. She would take herself out of the night rotation and avoid being alone with him at all costs. She wouldn't tell Tracey, though, in fear that her girlfriend and love would get angry and leave her. Harry would not make any kind of fuss over Blaise's distance, though she would catch his forlorn looks in her direction every once in a while, furthering her guilt. No one would be able to get any answers from either of them, no matter how hard they tried.

Normally, Susan would have been able to get to the heart of the problem by reading the answers from Blaise's face. Unfortunately, she would remain unaware of the problem for some time due to the amount of time she spent away from the group as she tried to salvage her friendship with Hannah. Hermione would have done the same with Harry, but he was able to hide his thoughts and feelings from her far too well by now. All in all, the effect on Harry was to make him wonder who would be next to leave him. He was destined to be alone, anyway.

Chapter 18:

"Not good enough, Potter," snarled Mad-eye Moody, "not nearly good enough! You aren't being aggressive enough! You can't leave 'em breathing!"

"I'll not become a cold-blooded murderer!" Harry shouted back.

"I don't know what your problem is," the retired Auror raged at Harry after they had completed the teen's training for the day. Eight training dummy Death Eaters had been totally subdued, but left alive by Harry. Mad-eye continued his argument as the younger wizard drank from the bottle of water he always had after their session, "You've killed before, you know that you'll have to kill again..."

But he was cut off by Harry hollering, "But I won't kill often! The only reason I killed before is because I didn't know enough magic to be able to not to. Now stop trying to make me into a bloody weapon!"

The two wizards stared heatedly at each other for a long moment in a silent battle of wills. Moody broke first. The old man nodded once, stiffly, and said, "Fine, we're done today. Same time next week and remember **CONSTANT VIGILANCE!**"

Harry didn't say another word; he simply nodded, collected his things and left the room. The retired Auror tracked the teen's movement down the hall with his magical eye. Once satisfied that he would be alone for some time, Mad-eye fired some privacy spells at the door and turned back to the room.

"I hate to do this to you, laddie," the old man said to the empty room, "but you have to learn this lesson, and quickly. Snape better have that potion ready next week." He closed his eyes and concentrated. Suddenly, Harry's seven companions appeared along with the two youngest Weasleys and Neville Longbottom: all of them wearing terrified expressions on their faces. Next, dozens of Death Eaters appeared surrounding the teens.

“Merlin forgive me for this because Potter sure as hell won't,” grumbled Mad-eye as the formerly motionless creations began to move.

O_O

Lisa Turpin was chewing her lip nervously as she stared at Harry Potter from across the Great Hall. She knew he was aware of her dark blue eyes boring into him. He had caught her staring, after all, but that didn't make her stop. It didn't seem to faze the teen wizard, either. But that was only natural as over half of the school was staring at him, also.

When the young man and his friends got up and left the Hall, Lisa was quick to follow. She watched as the group slowly broke apart. First, the three Slytherins headed outside instead of up the stairs with the rest. The dark-haired girl hugged Harry, the redhead kissed him on the cheek and squeezed Granger's hand as she passed, but the blonde just turned and walked away. The dark-haired Ravenclaw stalker noticed the resigned look that the young wizard shot at the blonde. The two Hufflepuffs broke off next, the strawberry blonde hugged Harry while the pure blonde hugged Longbottom.

When they reached the third floor, Harry and Granger split off from the rest of the group, who were presumably going to the seventh floor. The two disappeared around a corner and Lisa hurried to follow. When she rounded the corner, though, the corridor was empty. She was half-way down the hall when she felt someone's breath on the back of her neck and an emotionless, male voice asked, “Why are you following me?”

Lisa shrieked suddenly, spun around and started backing away from the wizard that had suddenly appeared behind her. “W-w-w-. H-h-h-how,” the Ravenclaw stuttered before she was interrupted by a voice that was, once again, behind her. This time it was female, “You should really answer him, Turpin.”

This time, when Lisa shrieked and spun, she lost her balance and fell roughly on the floor. From her seat on her smarting rump, the dark-haired girl stared up at a visibly unamused Hermione Granger.

“Why were you following us?” Harry asked again and Lisa froze when her eyes met his glowing, emerald glare.

After a long moment of terrified silence, the Ravenclaw was able to squeak out, “I-I-I have t-to speak with the Head of the House of Potter...a-a-alone.”

Harry looked into Hermione's eyes for a moment, before he looked back to the frightened girl and said, “Fine. This room is empty. You can speak to me in here,” indicating an empty classroom. The dark-blue eyed girl glanced questioningly at Hermione who smirked and said, “Oh, I'll just wait out here for you.”

The teen wizard was already holding the door open with an impatient look on his face by the time Lisa made it to her feet. She jumped and scurried into the room when she saw his face. The door closed and Harry quickly began firing spells that the young woman didn't recognize at the walls.

“Alright, Turpin, we're alone, what do you want?” He asked.

“What spells did you just use? I don't know any of them,” inquired the studious witch.

“Privacy spells. Focus Ravenclaw! You were following me for a reason. Out with it!” snapped the impatient wizard.

“Right, right,” said Lisa as she started her long, dark hair into a tight ponytail, a nervous habit that she had. “Right, um, yeah. Marriage contracts!” She blurted out suddenly.

“Oh,” said Harry and his entire demeanour changed. He went from a confident, slightly angry young man to a weary, nervous teenager in a matter of seconds. “Yeah, I should probably stop putting these off.” He put his bag on the desk next to him and began searching through it, finally pulling out a rolled up piece of parchment.

This sparked Lisa's memory and she bent down quickly to pick up her own bag. "Ouch!" She exclaimed and took down her ponytail after feeling a sharp pain in the back of her neck.

"Are you alright?" Harry asked, confused.

Lisa blushed and continued searching through her bag as she answered, "I'm fine. Sometimes I pull my ponytails too tight and the hairs on the back of my neck get yanked out. Ah, here it is." The young woman also pulled a rolled up piece of parchment from her bag.

Harry opened his mouth to begin his rejection speech, but was interrupted by the witch in front of him.

"Wait," she said, holding up her hand as her demeanour also changed. Instead of a nervous teenager, she was now a representative of the Head of her family. She continued as she held up her letter, "Let me go first. I, Lisa Lucinda Turpin, on behalf of the Head of House Turpin, Charles Robert Turpin, do hereby rescind the Proposal for the Contractual Marriage submitted previously on the grounds of the wizard in question no longer being a suitable match for a daughter of the Turpin family."

Harry blinked in surprise before he asked incredulously, "You're rejecting me because of the Prophet bullshit? Really?! Whatever. Is there anything else you need?"

Lisa shook her head no and Harry waved his wand to cancel the privacy spells and left the room, saying, "Fine. See you around."

The dark haired girl let out a breath she was holding when she realized she wasn't about to get hexed. She too, then, left the room, scratching an itch on the back of her neck.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

Harry's trials with the Marriage Contracts continued the following Saturday when, after lunch, the wizard found himself alone with Millicent Bulstrode in an unused classroom on the second floor.

“So, what do you want wif me Potter?” asked the corpulent witch as she picked a rather large chunk of – something- out of her teeth, looked at it, and ate it. “Come to have your wicked way wif me? I ain’t that kinda girl, y’know.”

It took every ounce of willpower that Harry had not to vomit on the spot. “No,” he choked out, “no, Merlin no. I brought you here for this.” He waved the rolled up piece of parchment in his hand in Millicent’s general direction. “It’s your Marriage Contract proposal.”

“So you have brought me here to bump uglies! You’re going to article twelve me! You’re a bit scrawnier than I’d like, but I guess you’ll do. Well, don’t just stand there, get your kit off. I ain’t got all day.” As the Slytherin spoke she was moving desks about to clear a space for them. Harry could have sworn he heard giggling as he gagged uncontrollably.

“I’m here to reject the offer!” He shouted screamed in a panicked, high pitched voice. Then he gave her the official speech and handed the parchment back to her.

“You mean we ain’t gonna screw?” Millicent asked, sounding a bit disappointed. “Oh, well. I still want my kiss, though! A right proper snog, too.”

“Kiss?” Harry squeaked. “What kiss? I’m not kissing you!” As Harry was speaking, Millicent had pulled out a tube of lipstick and was spreading it slowly around her lips, making them lime green.

“I’ve heard you’ve kissed all the other girls you’ve turned down, Potter, and I want mine.” The large girl said as she tried to saunter over to him. Unfortunately for Harry, Millicent’s sauntering looked more like someone was rolling a bag full of cottage cheese down a hill.

“You’ve ah, you’ve still got crumbs in your moustache,” whimpered the terrified young wizard as he was backed against a wall by the Slytherin’s approach. His green eyes were as wide as saucers when Millicent puckered her hairy lips and leaned into him.

“Alright, Millie, that’s quite far enough,” Tracey’s voice rang out in the room. The two original occupants looked around and saw the forms of Tracey, Daphne, and Blaise fade into view.

“We may have enjoyed the sight of Harry whimpering in fear because of you, but did you really think we would let you poison him?” asked Daphne with a smirk on her lips, directed at the pale and shaking form of Harry.

“Poison? What poison. I ain’t got no idea what yer talkin’ ‘bout!” barked Millie defensively.

“Oh, please,” chided Blaise, “poisoned lipstick is the oldest trick in the book. We knew you were going to try something, Bulstrode: we just didn’t know what. It’s really the only reason your father would have submitted that contract proposal. It didn’t work; now scurry along before we decide to...retaliate.”

Having been on the receiving end on some of their retaliations before, Millie’s skin lost all of its colour and she hurried out of the room. Once the door shut, Harry lost his battle against his stomach and heaved in a corner. Daphne fired an Evanesco at the mess and the young man shot a breath freshening charm at himself before he turned back to the witches.

“I appreciate the rescue, but couldn’t you have done it a bit sooner?” He asked plaintively.

“And miss seeing the great Harry Potter cower in terror? I think not.” Replied Tracey primly before the three Slytherins broke down in laughter.

“Yes, yes, very funny,” said Harry archly, “but what I want to know is; you lived with her for five years. How did you handle the smell!? It was like she uses a Hippogriff’s arse for a shower!”

“Yeah, I don’t think I’ve ever seen Millie bathe while at the castle,” answered Blaise, although she wasn’t making eye contact with Harry. “The air freshening charm is the first spell any of us ever learned.”

“Good plan,” said the wizard. “Come on, I need to take a scalding hot shower to get this smell off of me before Grace and her friends show up.”

Still chuckling, the witches followed him out of the room and back to the common room. “So, what’s the score so far? You got nothing from Daphne, a hug from Ginny, kisses from the Patils and Sue, rejected by Turpin, and an attempted poisoning from Millie,” said Tracey, “I wonder what kind of adventure is going to happen during the next one.”

“I shudder to think,” said Harry as they entered their common room. “The last one I’ve got is Vane. She’s going to be a nightmare.”

“What’s going to be a nightmare?” inquired Hermione from the couch, where she had a book opened on her lap.

“Harry turning down Romilda Vane,” said Daphne as she kissed her girlfriend hello.

“You’ll want to be careful around her, Harry,” said Luna from one of the chairs, “Ginny told me that Romilda was talking to her friends about brewing a love potion. Ginny said she’ll put a stop to it if she can, but she doesn’t know where they’ll be brewing.”

“Remind me to thank her later. I’m off to take a shower,” he said as he walked to the stairs. He knew his Slytherins were regaling the rest of the girls with the story of what just happened by the laughter drifting up the stairs behind him.

“It wasn’t that funny,” he grumbled as he started to shed his clothing. He shuddered once more as he saw the grease stains on his robes from where Millicent’s belly pressed against him. He decided to spare Dobby the trouble of attempting to wash it off and hit his pile of clothes with a wordless Incendio before he jumped into the shower.

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“And then the greasy git just shouted, “POTTER! Ten points from Gryffindor!” And Tracey just put on an innocent expression and said,

“But Professor, I’m in your house. Shouldn’t that be ten points from Slytherin for blinking funny?” Ron said to a rapt audience at the dinner table on Sunday. “Snape just sputtered and shouted that class was dismissed. Oh, it was brilliant!”

Tracey breathed on her fingernails and polished them against her shirt, “Thank you, thank you. I try.”

“The best part, though,” added an adoring Blaise, “was that she didn’t get into any kind of punishment at all!”

Letting out an exasperated sigh, Hermione said, “I still don’t know how you talked your way out of trouble when you called him a greasy bat to his face.”

“It’s best not to think about it, dear,” said Daphne as she patted her girlfriend’s hand, “it’ll just frustrate you. Tracey can talk her way out of almost anything.”

Any further discussion was cut off as Professor McGonagall tapped the side of her goblet with her knife and Dumbledore rose from his chair.

“I apologize for drawing your attention away from such a wonderful meal,” said the Headmaster, “but I have an announcement that I would like to make. I am sure you are all aware of the war that is being fought outside these walls and the tensions that are arising within. The staff and I realize that we must do something to provide a release for you. Unfortunately this will not be done as additional Hogsmeade visits. Instead, we have decided to host another Yule Ball for you this year.”

He paused to let the delighted whispering pass between the students for a few moments before he raised his hands for silence, which he got almost immediately. He continued, “The same rules that we had two years ago shall apply. The dance is restricted for third years and below, unless invited by an older year. For the first through third years, we shall have a room set up for games and snacks and such. There will be at least one more Hogsmeade visit so that students may acquire the appropriate attire, though I will not say when it is until

closer to the date for security reasons. That is all. Enjoy your evening.”

The Great Hall was filled with clapping and excited whispers as the old wizard sat down. The heavy feeling that had been hanging over the castle recently seemed to lighten a bit as well.

Hermione immediately turned to face Ron with an arched eyebrow. “And what are you not going to do this year, Ronald?”

“Erm- ask you to the ball?” Answered Ron after he swallowed what was in his mouth, though it sounded like more of a question than an answer.

Not able to miss an opportunity for some teasing, Daphne winked at Harry then said, affronted, “What, is our Hermione not good enough for you? Do you think she’s ugly or something?”

“N-n-no, not at all,” stammered Ron, feeling trapped, “she’s very attractive!”

“So, what,” said Hermione angrily, “you only see me for my body? Is that all I am to you!?”

“Aw, come on, Hermione,” begged Ron, “you know that’s not true! I’m just interested in someone else, is all.”

“If you’re interested in someone else,” said Luna as she spooned more pudding onto her plate, “then why are you spending so much time ogling Hermione’s bits?”

The panicking redhead’s face turned bright red as he choked out, “I’m not ogling Hermione’s bits!”

“So now my bits aren’t good enough for you?!” hissed Hermione, though the corners of her mouth were twitching as she tried not to laugh at the youngest Weasley boy.

Panicking, Ron attempted a tactical retreat, “Well, you see...” and he ran out of the Great Hall as fast as his long legs could take him. As soon as he was gone, the group broke down into laughter once more.

“Nicely done, ladies,” said Harry, “I don’t ever think I’ve seen Ron move that fast if food wasn’t involved. He’s really going to flip when he realizes that Hermione played a prank on him.”

“While it turned out to be amusing, that really wasn’t my intent.” admitted Hermione, “I was trying to get him to ask whomever he wanted to take early. Not as a last resort.”

“Good advice,” commented Neville, who then turned to his girlfriend, “Hannah, will you be my date to the Yule Ball?”

The blonde Hufflepuff giggled and said, “Of course, I will.”

Harry looked at Dean and gestured towards Ginny.

“Already taken care of, mate. I asked her while Ron was getting teased,” said the Gryffindor boy.

“What about you, Harry,” prodded Neville, “who are you going to ask?”

“I’m not,” said the emerald eyed wizard firmly. “My dance card is already full up. I would be a pretty awful date, going off to dance with a bunch of other women.”

“Good point,” admitted Susan, “though, you might want to claim one of us is your date, if only to fend off the advances of the at least two dozen girls who are currently looking at you speculatively.”

“Hmph,” said Harry, “apparently being an aspiring Dark Lord is not enough to exclude me from being a date to the Ball. Bloody bunch of nutters.”

“Speaking of nutters,” said Ginny, “Romilda looks to be about foaming at the mouth over there.”

“You should really take care of her contract proposal, Harry,” chided Hermione. “Even if she is crazy, it’s not nice to make her wait like that.”

“Alright, alright,” replied the wizard, “I’ll do it tomorrow.”

This is how Harry found himself in yet another unused classroom leaning against the desk with his arms crossed in front of his chest waiting for Romilda Vane to show up. In one hand he held his wand and in the other was the last rolled up contract proposal. In his mind, Harry was cursing Hermione for guilt-tripping him into doing this. He knew he had to; he just wanted to put it off as long as possible.

Finally, the door opened and the young, dark haired, Gryffindor witch stepped confidently into the room with a large smile on her face.

“I knew you’d come around to me, Harry,” she said, “I’m going to make such a good Mrs. Potter.”

“Romilda, stop,” said the wizard firmly, “that’s not what is happening here. I, Harry James Potter, Head of House Potter and Head of House Black hereby reject the proposal for the Contract of Marriage for Romilda Clarice Vane, thus making it and all it entails void.”

There was a moment of silence as what Harry said sunk into the girl’s mind. The look that slowly appeared on her face had his eyes growing large with fear.

“Oh shit,” was all he could say.

Professor McGonagall happened to be walking past the classroom that the two Gryffindors were in when she was frozen in place by the blood curdling scream that pierced the air. The Deputy Headmistress burst through the door, wand in hand, ready to defend against whatever attack was happening.

What she found though, was one of her fifth year girls lying at the feet of Harry Potter, screaming as if she were being placed under the Cruciatus curse. Harry’s face was a mask of perplexed horror. This

look was matched on the faces of the seven witches who were fading into view, having been hidden by Disillusionment Charms.

“Mr. Potter, Ms. Vane, what is going on here?” asked the Professor.

“She’s bonkers, that’s what,” said Susan.

“Ms. Bones, I was not asking you. Mr. Potter, explain why Ms. Vane was screaming like that.” McGonagall once again requested.

“Honestly, Professor,” answered Harry, “Susan hit the nail pretty well on the head, there. I brought her here to reject her Marriage Contract proposal and as soon as the words were out of my mouth, she was on the floor screaming.”

“And why are the other witches here?” continued McGonagall

“Protection, Professor,” answered Hermione, “Romilda’s actions have always been...erratic. We were worried she would try something with Harry.”

“And why are you on the ground, Ms. Vane?” said the Transfiguration teacher while she looked down at the girl on the floor with a raised eyebrow.

“I love him!” cried Romilda, “he’s my whole life! I’ll die without him!”

Minerva McGonagall looked up to the heavens for some patience and, once again, wondered why her calling was to teach teenagers.

“Come along, Ms. Vane,” said the teacher, “let’s get you to the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey can give you a calming draft.”

After the two witches left, Harry was left with his five consorts plus Padma and Susan.

“That went well, I’d say,” said Luna with a smile on her face.

Harry snorted and said, “Come on, Luna, let’s sneak down to the kitchens and get some more pudding.”

“Yay, pudding!” exclaimed the blonde happily, the other witches following behind, shaking their heads fondly.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

“I think the team is really coming together,” said Ron as he and Harry walked back toward the seventh floor from their Quidditch Practice. As usual, the two teen wizards stayed behind to put away all of the equipment and to make sure they spent a little time together. Harry didn’t have much more free time than this to speak with his first friend his age.

“Yeah, Demelza and Ginny are working really well with Katie. They aren’t Alicia and Angelina, but they’re still good,” replied Harry.

“I just hope they’re prepared for how dirty the Slytherins play. It’s probably going to be even worse this year with Malfoy as Captain,” said the Gryffindor Captain. He stopped in front of a portrait and said,

“Let’s cut through here, it’ll be a lot quicker and I want to get in a few games of chess with Neville before bed. He actually puts up a pretty decent challenge unlike-”

Ron’s words cut off as he froze completely just after he entered the secret passageway. Harry ran face first into the redhead’s back.

“Ow! What the bloody h-” Harry also froze when he saw what the youngest Weasley boy was staring at. Ginny and Dean were locked together in a passionate embrace with Ginny pushed up against the wall. The redheaded girl’s left arm was around Dean’s neck while her right was reaching into his pants, which were undone. The other Gryffindor’s hands were firmly attached to his girlfriend’s breasts, which were exposed due to her shirt being pushed up to her shoulders. They obviously didn’t know they were no longer alone since they hadn’t stopped, until Ron bellowed, “GET YOUR FILTHY PAWS OFF MY SISTER!”

The two snogging teens broke apart quickly, their eyes widening in surprise at who had caught them. They quickly righted their clothes

as much as possible while Ginny fired back at her brother, “Sod off, Ron!”

“I’ll kill him!” screamed the redheaded boy, his ears turning as red as a tomato as he pulled his wand. This prompted Harry to step in between the two angry siblings. Ginny also pulled her wand and stood in front of Dean, looking to curse her brother.

“Get out of the way, Harry,” shouted the witch as she tried to aim around him, “I’m going to teach my darling brother to MIND HIS OWN BUSINESS!”

“I wouldn’t have to if my sister weren’t a SCARLET WOMAN!” was Ron’s answering bellow.

“She’s not a scarlet woman, Ron!” declared Dean, angrily.

“We were just having a snog!” cried out Ginny, angry tears starting to run down her face, “of course you wouldn’t be able to recognize it, not having even kissed a girl yet!”

“Shut up!” said the youngest Weasley boy, defensively.

Seeing the proverbial blood in the water, the only female Weasley sibling went in for the kill, saying sweetly, “All of your other friends have snogged a girl, Ron. Hell, Harry has seven witches to snog! And you can’t find just one!”

Now that he had been brought into the argument, and wanting to defend his consorts and friends, Harry intervened, “Right, that’s bloody well enough! Both of you stop it, now!” In his anger, Harry’s emerald eyes started glowing and a slight breeze started blowing around them. Having seen this before in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place, the siblings immediately stopped their fighting, though they continued to glare daggers at each other.

“Ron, Dean, go back to the Common Room. Take different routes and I don’t want to hear that you’ve even spoken to each other for the rest of the night. Got it?” snapped Harry so forcefully that the other

two wizards never even thought of disobeying. "Ginny," he continued, "fix yourself up and follow me. We're going to have a little chat."

"But-" she started.

"Now!" Harry cut her off with a yell, before he stomped off to the closest empty classroom. Once both Gryffindors were in the room, Harry sealed it with every locking and privacy charm he knew, which, by now, was quite a lot. Satisfied with his work, he rounded on the redheaded fifth year and yelled, "Just what in the hell were you thinking?"

Ginny, who was still keyed up from her stand-off with her brother, immediately took offense and shouted back, "Oh, so now you're going to do the over-protective older brother routine, too? Well, thanks but no thanks. I already have six of them, I don't need another! And what I do with my boyfriend is none of your bloody business!"

"What are you talking about?" asked a suddenly very confused Harry.

"You brought me in here to give me a bollocking over finding me snogging Dean, right?" asked Ginny indignantly.

"What? No! No," declared the surprised wizard, "I don't care about that. I brought you in here to give you a bollocking about spreading lies!"

"Spreading lies..." replied the youngest Weasley as she tried to remember what had been said. Realization dawned in her eyes before she grimaced and said, "Merlin, I'm sorry Harry. I guess I just proved I'm really a Weasley; running my mouth before running my brain."

"It's alright, Gin," sighed Harry, "I just wish you hadn't done it in front of Ron. Merlin knows what his reaction will be. And hopefully we can set Dean straight before he talks to Seamus. The rumourmill will be in full swing if we don't." Ginny merely stood looking apologetic as Harry ran his hands through his hair and said, "The frustrating part of it,

though, is that both you and Ron know what my relationship to each of those girls are. None of them are interested in me like that.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” said the redheaded girl. Now that cooler heads were prevailing, Harry conjured a sofa and the two Gryffindors sank into it side by side. “Padma and Susan at the very least,” she continued, “look like they’d be interested in more with you. Luna, too, most likely.”

“Maybe. But I know what I am to them right now; protector and friend, and I’m comfortable with that. I don’t want to do anything that could jeopardize that with any of them,” he said while he thought, “Like I did with Blaise.”

Ginny looked like she didn’t agree with his assessment, but decided to hold her tongue on that point because Harry looked like he would be unable to believe her anyway. “So,” she asked instead, “that’s what you think you are to them, but what are they to you?”

The young man was silent for a long moment as he thought about the answer. In the end, he could only say with a small smile, “They’re my family.”

“A family of seven highly attractive witches,” said the younger girl teasingly, “how do you cope?”

“Baggy robes and lots of cold showers,” replied Harry, dryly. Ginny stared at him in shock at his bluntness before they both began laughing.

After he glanced at his watch, he stood and sighed, “It’s getting late; we should head back. Thank you for the talk, Ginny.”

“Anytime, Harry, I mean it,” replied the younger girl, “and thank you for not lecturing me about having a snog with Dean.”

“What I said earlier? About me not caring? It’s not entirely true, you know,” said Harry, “I do care. I just think that if you’re old enough to fight Death Eaters with me, you’re old enough to have a snog with someone. Plus, Dean’s a good bloke. I don’t think he’ll push you

farther than you're ready to go. If he does, though, feel free to come to me. I'll set him straight. Just...find a more private place for your snog spot. While that passageway is secret, it's not that secret."

"Yeah, not our best choice" conceded Ginny with a grimace, "thank you, Harry, for your concern. And thank you for not being another over-protective older brother."

The raven-haired teen chuckled and said, "You have enough of those. I prefer to think of myself as...a cool, favourite cousin. Come on, let's head back."

Ginny smiled and said, "I can live with that," as she followed the wizard out of the room.

As the two approached the Gryffindor Common Room, where Harry had decided to see if any students needed help in their Defence Against the Dark Arts classes, they heard a familiar voice bark out the password.

"Figures Ron took the long way back," said Harry, "maybe it was to cool down a bit."

"Didn't sound like it worked too well, though," added Ginny.

When they entered through the portrait of the fat lady, who was ranting about rude teenagers, they were met with the shocked faces of their housemates. All of whom were staring at the couch in front of the fire in complete silence save a weird slurping sound. On the floor next to the couch, Parvati was sprawled on the floor with a disgruntled look on her face, as if she had been tossed off the couch. Hermione was on the chair next to the couch and was staring with wide, horrified eyes and a hand over her mouth at the pair that were all but rutting on the couch. The strange slurping sounds seemed to be coming from where Ron and Lavender's mouths were fused together.

"He's trying to eat her face!" shouted a first year boy.

"Maybe she's part Dementor," added a third year girl.

"All right, everyone, show's over! I think it's time for bed for everyone," said Harry in a voice that had all of the students save Ginny, Parvati, Hermione, Ron and Lavender grumbling while they headed for the stairs.

"Hermione," called out Ginny in a questioning voice.

The brunette moved her hand from her mouth long enough to whisper loudly, "She had just taken a bite of a chocolate frog! He didn't give her time to swallow!"

Parvati explained the rest of the situation, "the big lout just came barrelling into the room, shouted, "Lavender ballwi'me" and tackled her to the couch. Knocked me off in the process! Didn't even give her a chance to answer."

At that moment, Ron pulled himself off of Lavender, swallowed whatever was in his mouth and said, "So, will you?"

Lavender nodded frantically and said a breathy, "Uh huh," before she pulled the redhead back down to her.

"I'm gonna be sick!" Hermione exclaimed as she ran forward toward the, now, green flickering flames in the fireplace. Haleigh had seen the Gryffindor prefect coming from her portrait and activated the internal floo for the soon-to-be-ill girl.

"Right," said Parvati as she looked to where her former roommate had left, "let's separate these two before they start shagging and we have to burn the couch."

"Good idea," said Harry as he started yelling at the newly formed couple, "Oi! Lovebirds! Knock it off and go to bed! Ron! Lavender! Hello!" The two ignored him even as he poked at Ron with his wand.

"Piss off, Harry, I'm busy," was Ron's muffled reply.

"Allow me," said Ginny, "I saw mum do this to Charlie and one of his girlfriends, once." She pointed her wand and muttered something

Harry couldn't hear. The result was that ice cold water spewed from the small girl's wand and dumped on the snogging teens.

"Bloody hell, Ginny! What'd you do that for?" screeched Ron indignantly.

"After doing what you did downstairs, you have the stones to ask me that?" hissed his sister dangerously, "it's late; you need to get to sleep."

Ron glared at his sister for a moment, before deciding it was a battle he wasn't going to win and said, "Fine. I'll see you tomorrow, Lav."

The blonde girl just giggled and nodded. Harry shook his head as he watched his friend stomp up the stairs before he waved his goodbye to the other three and went back to his own common room for some much needed rest.

Chapter 19:

Harry sat in his room on the edge of his bed. The room was still dark as it was quite early Sunday morning and the sun had yet to rise. The young man's body was covered in sweat, as if he was overheated, yet he was shivering quite fiercely. His head was in his hands, one of which was clutching the lightning bolt shaped scar on his forehead. The young wizard was trying to think through the mind-numbing pain that was stabbing through his head, originating in his scar.

Once more, the elevated emotions of the Dark Lord Voldemort flowed through the link between the two wizards' minds causing Harry to see what Voldemort saw. The man once called Tom Riddle had been standing near a clearing in the darkest forest Harry had ever seen. The teen had gleaned from the evil man's mind that he was in Germany's Black Forest; in a part of it that had never been seen by Muggles. Harry felt the Dark Lord's curiosity as, when the older wizard stepped on a twig and startled some birds into flight, they deliberately flew around the clearing in front of him.

The clearing was what held Voldemort's attention, though. There seemed to be a barrier surrounding it that no life would cross. Even the trees on the edge of the clearing appeared to lean away from it. Light also seemed to fear this clearing, as, even though the Dark Lord could see the light from the full moon filtering through the canopy of the forest, the clearing remained dark as if it were in a cave deep beneath the surface of the earth.

When Voldemort crossed the barrier, though there were no spells in place that he could detect, he could feel a dark, malevolent force urging him forward. While this force was exciting and alluring to the Dark Lord, it caused unbridled agony to shoot through Harry's scar. Unaware of the guest in his mind or the pain the teen was going through, the red eyed man allowed the pull to guide him to its source. Unfortunately for Harry, the closer Voldemort got, the more pain the young man felt.

Finally reaching the middle of the clearing, the Dark Lord found a gnarled, blackened tree with no leaves that appeared to be glowing red. He reached out to touch a branch, but paused instinctively. The

sinister man drew his wand and used it to slice open his right palm. His blood sizzled as he spread it along the branch he wanted to take. After the thick liquid stopped sizzling, it was absorbed into the wood. The whole tree shuddered for a moment, culminating in a loud crack as the branch broke off and fell to the dry earth. The evil wizard picked up the fallen wood and immediately felt attuned to it. A truly sinister smile spread across his snake-like face. His quest was complete; the pieces of his new wand were collected. Lord Voldemort was ready to return to Britain.

Even as Harry sat and tried to massage the pain out of his head, he couldn't help but think that, despite the pain and ominous implications, this dream was far better than the one that had been robbing him of sleep each of the past four nights: the one that was beginning to haunt his waking mind, causing him to pull away from his friends and was affecting how he performed magic.

These nightmares started with Harry's training session with Moody the previous Wednesday. The training proceeded as normal, with Moody running Harry through drills and scenarios designed to pound the teen into the ground. But, when they finished and the younger wizard was taking a long drink from his bottle of water to prepare for their weekly argument; everything changed.

As soon as he swallowed his first mouthful of water, the green eyed wizard knew something was wrong. Very quickly, the potion that Moody had put into the bottle took effect. Harry's limbs suddenly stopped working and he crumbled to the floor. Mad-eye conjured a chair and levitated the paralysed wizard onto it, binding him there to make sure he didn't fall out.

"I'm sorry about this, lad," whispered the old man into Harry's ear, "but it's the only way you'll learn, and you have to learn this."

By now, the potion was in full effect. Harry's senses, other than sight and smell, were dulled to the point of being non-existent, and his mind was opened to everything he saw and heard. So he now believed that Moody was sorry and believed that whatever was happening was the only way he would learn whatever it was that Moody thought he needed to learn.

Therefore, when Moody said to the Room, "Run Potter scenario seventeen," Harry believed that his closest friends were standing in front of him, surrounded by Death Eater. For the next two hours, Harry was forced to watch and believe his friends and loved ones were being raped and tortured brutally while the retired Auror whispered in his ear that the only way to prevent this was to kill the Death Eaters first.

Finally, after the two hours were up and the magical projections of Harry's friends were little more than mangled corpses, barely recognizable as human, the potion's physical effects wore off and the teen wizard was able to move again.

He simply glanced warily at Moody as he collected his bag and silently left, too shocked to do anything else. Unfortunately, the images that were burned into his mind did not wear off as well. Starting that night, he could not sleep for more than an hour or two before he was forced to lay awake and try to banish the horrifying images from his mind. Two days after his "training," Harry found that he could no longer stay in the same room as his friends. Instead of seeing them, all he could see was their curse-ravaged bodies.

By Monday, his lack of sleep and the effects of the potions caused an image from Moody's "scenario" to pop into his mind every time he tried to focus his mind to cast a spell and it would go awry. It came to a head during his Tuesday training session with Professor McGonagall.

"Dammit!" The teen yelled in frustration and threw his wand across the room. He had been spending the last twenty minutes trying to animate a desk and his most successful attempt ended in the furniture expelling a pudding-like substance from its legs.

The transfiguration Professor eyed her student for a moment before she came to a decision.

"Gather your wand, Potter," she said as she rose from her seat, "and join me in my office."

Once the two were seated and Harry had turned down McGonagall's offered biscuits, the Gryffindor Head of House leaned forward and spoke earnestly, "Mr. Potter... Harry, what's wrong? I have noticed, and so have some of your other teachers, that you seem distracted and rather haggard. It's starting to affect your normally stellar, performance in class. You are struggling with spells I've seen you perform with an ease I've never seen before."

Chastised, Harry shifted in his seat and mumbled, "Sorry, Professor."

"I wasn't scolding you, Harry," replied the stern Professor in a tone much softer than the young man had ever heard from her, "just expressing some of my concerns. Though, I am much more worried about how you are pulling away from your friends. I don't understand what could have happened to cause this separation. Especially you and Miss Granger."

"Moody happened," muttered Harry, though McGonagall heard.

"What has Alastor done, Harry," asked the surprised witch. Minerva's lips drew together in an ever firmer and thinner line as the sixth year told his tale.

Once he was finished, the younger man seemed to deflate as his secret torture was no longer secret.

McGonagall, though, was visibly trembling in anger, though when she spoke, her voice was as calm as if she were teaching a lesson. "Rest assured, I will be having some – words with dear Alastor. But, for now, have you told your friends why you are avoiding them?"

Harry answered with a shake of his head and a quiet, "I can't. I...I don't want to hurt them like I know I am, but it hurts too much to be in the same room as them for very long."

"Would you like me to inform them for you? I will also talk to Alastor," McGonagall spat the name as if it had left a foul taste in her mouth, "and ask him which potion he used and Severus for a way to counter the effects."

"Thank you, Professor," said Harry, gratefully, "I-"

But he was cut off by a knock on the Transfiguration teacher's office door.

"Come in!" Minerva just about snapped. She felt she had been making some progress with her student and was afraid that the disruption would negate any effect of the talk they were having.

Of course, this is exactly what happened as it was Hermione who came through the door. "Hello, Professor. I just wanted to deliver my list of points taken from patrol last night."

"Grrk!" Gaspd Harry as the beautiful face of his best friend dissolved into the mangled mockery of a face before his very eyes.

"Harry!" Exclaimed Hermione as she took a step forward, intending to hug her wayward friend when he blurted out a barely intelligible apology and rushed from the room without any of his possessions. Tears filled the brunette's eyes as she watched her best friend run from her.

"What did I do?" She asked, plaintively.

"You did nothing, Miss Granger," replied the Gryffindor Head of House, "gather your fellow dorm mates, as well as Miss Padma Patil, Miss Bones, Mister and Miss Weasley, and Mister Longbottom. Bring them to my classroom after dinner and I will explain what is happening with Mr. Potter."

"But-" Hermione started and was cut off by McGonagall.

"But we both have classes we need to attend this afternoon, Miss Granger. Although, I will write a note excusing Mr. Potter from his classes. Merlin knows he needs the rest."

"Professor," argued Hermione sagely, "do you really think any of us will be able to eat when we know there is something wrong with Harry and the reason is waiting for us? You're asking for a miracle as it is; expecting us to be able to sit through classes while Harry suffers."

"You have a point," admitted the older woman, "very well, we will discuss this over dinner. I still need time to speak with Professor Snape and Alastor. For now, inform your friends and go to class."

"Yes, Professor," replied Hermione as she left.

No miracles were coming that afternoon as none of those involved in Harry's nightmares were able to concentrate at all on their afternoon lessons. Hermione even missed answering a question when she was called on.

Ron, who didn't have any classes that afternoon and was spending it with Lavender, was even distracted from snogging his beautiful, buxom girlfriend. This prompted them to stop and simply talk for the first time in their burgeoning, hormone-driven relationship. While this was somewhat off-putting for Ron, it did give the ditzy blonde some hope.

Finally, while dinner was being served in the Great Hall, the involved students met with the Deputy Headmistress and Alastor Moody. The Transfiguration teacher watched silently as the students entered and transfigured the desks into more comfortable seating. Ron, Ginny, and Neville shared one sofa, while the Slytherins shared another and Luna was sandwiched between Padma and Susan on the third. Hermione, who declared herself too anxious to sit, was standing behind the Slytherin's couch trying to calm herself by trailing her fingers through her girlfriend's long, dark red hair.

Professor McGonagall started the meeting by glaring at Alastor and saying, "Explain."

Moody grunted and glared back at the woman as he started speaking, "Potter was making progress, but had plateau'd. He wasn't putting the Death Eaters down for good! When Dumbledore asked for a status report, I told him the same thing."

"And, if I'm not mistaken," interrupted an irate Minerva, "you were told not to change that, were you not?"

"I was," conceded the aged Auror, "but I refuse to train him up just to see him get killed! So, after the meeting, Severus informed me of a potion that would help me get my points across to the boy. He brewed it and I gave it to Potter at his lesson last week. After showing him some possible scenarios of what could happen if he didn't shoot to kill, I sent him on his way to think about it."

"You showed him his friends getting tortured to death for two hours!" Shrieked McGonagall, eliciting a gasp from the teens in the room.

"I did," snarled Moody, "because that's what'll happen if we don't put that scum down for good!"

"So," said Ginny from between her brother and Neville, "because Harry didn't agree with you about killing, you pump him full of some potion and make him live through his worst nightmare. Brilliant! Did you also put him under the Cruciatus, or was your sadism satisfied enough already?" Her anger was evident in the sarcasm and increasing volume of her words.

Before Moody could reply, Susan was asking, "What were the exact effects of the potion that you gave him?"

"His limbs went dead, so he had to be secured in a chair, his senses other than vision and hearing were dampened, and it forced him to believe everything he saw and heard." Moody answered.

"I don't understand," said Ron, "why would that make Harry avoid us like his is? I mean, yeah, there's the guilt thing that he can do like no one else, but every time he sees us, it's like it physically hurts him."

McGonagall answered the redhead's query, "What Alastor failed to mention was that the potion is causing Harry to relive that lesson each night during what little sleep he can get. It is starting to affect his waking mind as well, which is the reason for his declining practical magic abilities and his avoidance of you all. Each time he looks at you, instead of seeing you as you are, he sees the after effect of your torture."

"Merlin," whispered Tracey into the dead silence of the room.

"What was the name of the potion you used?" asked Padma, thinking of ways to get an antidote.

Looking slightly abashed, Moody replied, "I don't know. Severus supplied it for me. It was clear, which allowed me to hide it in Potter's water bottle."

"So, let me see if I understand you correctly," said Hermione in a frigid tone that Ron knew all too well signified her barely contained rage, "you trick Harry into drinking a potion brewed by someone who would love to watch him suffer. A potion that you don't know the name of, nor do you know all of its effects."

The young brunette, who had begun pacing as she spoke, stopped suddenly and glared at the retired Auror.

"Are you out of your fucking mind?!" She suddenly screeched at the old wizard, causing him to start and pull his wand. "You know," Hermione continued in a righteous fury, "for someone who is always going on about Constant Vigilance; you've been pretty fucking cavalier about Harry's safety."

"Now, listen here, lass," started Moody angrily, "I-

"Shut up!" interrupted the bushy haired girl with a snarl, "we've wasted enough time arguing your stupidity. It's time to help Harry." Taking a deep breath and turning to her Head-of-House, she calmly asked, "Professor, you said you would contact Professor Snape?"

"I was unable to find him," answered McGonagall, secretly impressed with her favourite student's ability to take charge of the situation.

Daphne spoke next, saying, "Adelaide found me before I came here. She said she had Defence class earlier, but in the middle of it, Snape groaned and grabbed his left arm. He then shouted that class was over and rushed out of the room."

"Looks like the Dark Lord has returned from his trip abroad," said Moody, "Albus will need to be informed."

"Yes, Albus will need to be informed of a great many things," retorted Minerva, archly.

"Looks like we'll need to figure out on our own what potion he made," said Neville, who turned to Hermione and asked, "How can I help?"

"Thank you, Neville," said the Gryffindor Prefect absent-mindedly as she thought out her plan. She nodded once to herself before she started issuing orders.

"Right, Professor, could you take Moody and go inform the Headmaster of what he needs to know? Also, tell him that Harry will need a change in tutors and if he even thinks about suggesting Snape, I'll turn him into a bloody goat!"

Lips twitching in amusement, the stern teacher nodded and left, grabbing Moody as she passed, "Come along, Alastor, let's go find the Headmaster."

"Now," continued the brunette taskmistress, "if I know Harry..."

"Which you do, better than pretty much anyone else," interrupted Ron, causing the girl to smile at him.

"Yes, thank you, Ron," she replied, before continuing her statement, "he's probably got himself holed up in his room, mentally torturing himself. Daphne, Susan, and Tracey, go to our rooms and get Haleigh to convince Harry to lower whatever silencing charms he has on his door and talk to him. Maybe, if he doesn't actually see you, he'll be ok with your presence. Tell him that we're fine and that we'll help him."

"Blaise, since you can't seem to stand being in the same room with Harry right now, anyway, you can help Padma, Luna, and I in the library, researching."

"Wh- I- y-" sputtered the blonde Slytherin as her cheeks turned pink.

"We've all seen it, Blaise, dear," said Luna, airily, "Hermione's just put it out in the open, so you can deal with the fact that you're attracted to Harry."

Blaise turned pleading eyes to her girlfriend, "I-n-no, it's..."

Tracey patted her lover's hand and said, "Perhaps now isn't the time to discuss this. We have more important things to handle."

"You're absolutely right," said Hermione, "let's move people, Harry is counting on us."

"What about us? How can we help?" asked Ginny, indicating herself, her brother, and Neville.

"Oh, sorry, Neville, Ron, let the rest of the true DA, those who decided to stand by Harry, know what's going on in vague terms. Get them to help you lead the defence club on Wednesday, if anyone shows up."

The brunette turned to the youngest Weasley with an evil smile developing on her face, "Ginny, write a letter to both of our mothers letting them know what Moody did. We don't have time to punish him properly, so a talking to from both of our mothers will have to do."

Ron shuddered and said, "I'd almost prefer being turned into a ferret."

"MOVE, people," shouted Hermione as she led the students out of the room.

Daphne, who was walking next to Susan, shivered in pleasure and said, "I love when she gets like that."

"I know," replied Susan, quietly, "I don't even like girls like that and I thought she was sexy as hell."

The redheaded Slytherin looked at the Hufflepuff with an amused, raised eyebrow.

“What?” asked Susan, a little defensively, “I’m still straight. I’m still interested in Harry. Straight people are allowed to notice the sexiness of people of the same sex without being gay. Put that eyebrow down!”

The strawberry blonde's frustrated cry caused the Slytherin to laugh. “Relax,” said Daphne, “I know you're not batting the Bludger the other way. I just like seeing you all riled up like that.”

Susan just huffed and entered their common room to find Tracey already sending Haleigh off to convince Harry to let them talk to him. The three would spend most of the rest of the night outside of the wizard's door, talking to him. They tried to get him to take some Dreamless Sleep potion, but he refused. He was afraid that Moody's potion would override the other and he would be unable to wake from his nightmares.

Finally, at around three in the morning, after listening to one of the girls yawn for the thousandth time, he sent them off to bed with his deepest and most heartfelt thanks.

At the same time, Hermione was using her impressive researching skills to go through every potion book she could find. Around midnight, Professor McGonagall came to the library to calm a hyperventilating Madam Pince and give the four researchers a free pass into the restricted section.

Finally, at five in the morning, Hermione called out, “Found it!” and slammed a heavy tome onto the table, startling the other three back to wakefulness.

“So, what is it?” asked Padma as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

“It's called The Vision of Truth,” replied Hermione, “it's very rare and very difficult to brew; takes about a week, which matches what Snape told Moody. All the effects match, too: temporary paralysis, opened and suggestible mind, belief of what is seen and heard, and so on. What makes this potion so dangerous is that the harder that someone fights the visions, the more they are seen.”

"What would this mean for Harry?" asked Blaise, quietly, "I mean, he's the most stubborn person I've ever known."

Hermione nodded in agreement before she read the answer. "Apparently, eventually, he would believe we had all been tortured to death. Not even us standing in front of him, talking to him would be able to make him believe differently."

"Is there a cure?" queried a nervous Luna.

"There is," answered the brainy brunette, "a special purgative draught that looks to be exceedingly difficult to brew, but not outside our combined skill level. Let's see," she hummed as she glanced through the instructions, "it takes eight hours to brew, then it has to sit for twelve hours. Harry will take three doses, once every hour... oh my."

"What? What is it?" asked Padma as she took the book from Hermione and spun it around to read. "Oh my, indeed. It looks like Harry will spend the next twenty hours or so by the loo as the draught does its work. He'll end up seriously dehydrated and with the most cracking headache ever, but he'll be back to normal."

"Poor Harry," said Luna. The others nodded along with the blonde girl's statement. This would not be pleasant for the wizard.

"Ok, let's get these ingredients and get to work," said Hermione as she stood.

"I don't think so, Hermione," said the odd Ravenclaw as Blaise took the book from the Gryffindor's hands. "You haven't slept in twenty four hours and, as you said, this is a very difficult potion to brew. You need to sleep. At least for a few hours."

"But Harry hasn't slept, either!" complained Hermione.

"Yes, and we plan to rectify that as well, before his ordeal," placated Padma, "according to this book, Dreamless Sleep will negate his visions. At least for a bit. I'll go to Madam Pomfrey and get some for the both of you and to warn her that Harry will be visiting her early Friday morning."

The Gryffindor girl sighed and conceded, as she was led away by Blaise and Luna. "Alright, but get someone to gather the ingredients while I'm sleeping. I want to start as soon as I wake."

When the group gathered again, it was close to one o'clock that afternoon and the rest of the true DA, Hannah, Lavender, Parvati, Dean, Seamus, and Katie, had joined them in their large bathroom where Hermione had set up her cauldron.

"What is it with you and brewing potions in bathrooms?" asked Ron.

"Fewer interruptions and easier cleanup if things go wrong," answered a pink-cheeked Hermione.

"So," Hannah said from next to Neville, "what can we do to help?"

"Nothing right now," said Daphne as she helped Hermione prepare ingredients. "We've got everything covered in terms of the brewing, but Harry may need some help later, if only by means of keeping him company. We don't know how long it will take before we all can be in his presence without hurting him."

"I guess we should go to afternoon classes, then?" said Parvati with a disappointed look on her face.

"It's not so bad," said Seamus with a gentle pat on the Indian girl's shoulder, "it's just Divination this afternoon."

"Feel free to come back here when your classes are over," offered Padma, "you can work on homework in our common room with us while we all wait."

"Sounds like a party," said Dean as he rolled his eyes. He stood and started walking to the door and held out his hand to the youngest Weasley. "Come on, Gin, I'll walk you to your Charms class."

With that, the group left except for Hermione and Daphne, who had begun the brewing process.

Eight hours later, the true DA had once again gathered, though this time they were in the common room. It was close to nine at night and an exhausted looking Hermione and Daphne trudged down the stairs carrying three flasks of lumpy, brown liquid between them.

"No wonder Harry's going to have to spend a day in front of the loo!" exclaimed Seamus, "It looks like you bottled shite!"

"Yes, thank you, Finnegan," snarked Daphne, "we're hoping it settles a bit as it sits for the next twelve hours."

"Don't matter if it's floaters or sinkers, shite is shite," opined the Irish Gryffindor.

"Seamus!" screeched Parvati as she smacked him in the arm, "that's foul!"

"He does bring up a valid point, though," admitted Ron, "who's going to get Harry to drink that? Madam Pomfrey has enough difficulty getting him to take potions that look normal."

"You're right, Ron," said Hermione, though she looked surprised to be saying it, "none of us who are featured in Harry's visions can give it to him. Once the effects of the Vision of Truth potion wear off, I plan on being with him, but he needs someone else until then."

"I can give him the first dose," offered Katie, "but I've got a study group at ten that I can't ditch."

"I can do the third dose," offered Hannah, shyly, "but I've got class before that."

"I'll give him the second," said Lavender, earning a grateful smile from her boyfriend.

"Thank you, all," said Hermione, "Katie, he gets the first flask at nine. Erm, I don't really know what effect it will have on him, so be prepared for anything."

"Wonderful," the seventh year said sarcastically.

Harry woke slowly from his potion-induced slumber. He was surprised that the images and memories that had been haunting him did not come back when he was lucid once more. The hope that his ordeal was over died when the image of Hermione screaming as her eyes were dug out of her skull assaulted his mind.

The young man buried his face in one of his pillows and screamed as he used the Occlumency skills he had to push the image out of his head. He was also struggling against the belief that his friends were well and truly dead, a belief that was becoming more and more difficult to force out of his mind.

Harry's head jerked out of his pillow at the sound of a knock on the door. Before he could shout for the person to leave him alone, the person on the other side of the door shouted first.

"Open the door, Harry, it's Katie," the Chaser shouted, "Hermione's cooked up a cure and I'm not leaving until you take it."

A feeling of hope crept into his chest as he burst from his bed to fling open the door and pull the older girl in.

"Well," said a slightly out of breath Katie when Harry had closed the door again, "if this is all it took to get locked in a room with a half-starkers Harry Potter, I would have done it ages ago."

"You're a bloody laugh riot, Bell," replied Harry, "George really must be rubbing off in you."

"Don't you mean 'rubbing off on me'?" asked the senior Chaser.

"Why, Miss Bell," teased Harry, "I didn't know you were into that kind of thing. Kinky."

The wizard whooped in joy and pumped his fist as the blush spread down the witch's neck. "It's not gonna be so easy to win the game this year, is it? I bet you're really missing Alicia and Angelina, now."

He was referring to the “game” that the three Gryffindor Chasers started playing with him after he had joined the Quidditch team in his first year. The goal was to make the boy blush in any way possible. Extra points for severity and sputtering. Needless to say, up until this year, it was a very one-sided contest.

Once she had regained control over her blush, she arched an eyebrow at the still chuckling young man and said, “Enjoy yourself? Good, cause this is where my fun begins.” Harry immediately stopped laughing and eyed the girl warily as she smiled sweetly and set a goblet that seemed to be filled with a thick, lumpy brown concoction that smelled as foul as can be.

“Drink up!” Katie chirped and laughed when Harry winced.

“That’s the cure?” the teen wizard asked dubiously, getting a happy nod in response. “Wonderful. Side effects?”

“None from the first dose,” answered the Chaser who was now acting more seriously. “You have three to take over the next three hours. Hermione said the book was...unclear as to what each dose would actually do to you, but once you have all three in you, you’ll need to be by the loo. It’s not going to be pleasant.”

“Lovely,” said Harry, sarcastically. “Remind me to get something special for Moody for Christmas. Well, there’s nothing for it, I guess. Here’s to you.” And with that, he drank down the vile potion as quickly as he could, almost gagging several times. Immediately after he drained the last drop, the young man groaned and dropped onto his bed and curled into a tight ball. Katie ran over to him and started rubbing his back to try and comfort him as his body was shaking quite fiercely.

After a few moments, he stilled and uncurled, glancing up at the seventh year girl with gratitude in his eyes. “Well,” he said, “that tasted bloody awful.”

“How are you feeling?” the older girl asked. “You were shaking pretty badly.”

"I'm fine, just an effect of the potion," replied Harry, his eyes clearly showing the thanks he couldn't voice. "What now?"

"Now," answered Katie, "I stay here with you for the next hour to make sure you don't need anything, then it's Lavender's turn with the next dose." She smiled and put her feet up on the side of his bed and said, "So, what's new?"

The hour passed very quickly and very pleasantly for Harry. He had always enjoyed the lively, exuberant nature of the three Chasers from the previous five years. It was always easy to laugh and joke with them, though normally his face ended up with a blush that could make any Weasley proud. Luckily for both teens, the first dose of the cure had no discernable effect on Harry, just as Hermione predicted.

When Lavender knocked and entered the room with the next goblet of potion, Harry thanked Katie once more and sent her on her way with a hug.

The giggly blonde sixth year approached Harry with a smile and the goblet stretched as far from her face as possible. The young man grimaced, and drank down the vile potion as quickly as possible. His shivering was more severe and lasted longer this time and even after he stopped, tremors still ran through his body for the following hour. He also found it difficult to concentrate on only one thing at a time; which was why Lavender was slightly frustrated as she tried to hold an important conversation with the wizard, "Harry! Harry look at me. Over here, Harry. Yes, that spoon is shiny. This is important!"

She was startled when, suddenly, Harry's unblinking green eyes were staring directly at her.

"Speak quickly, Lavender," said the wizard as sweat started to appear on his forehead, "I don't know how long I can concentrate."

"Ok, I need you to turn down my marriage contract proposal. I did it as a lark because Parv was. Now, I'm with Ron and don't want this to bite me in the arse." Lavender said quickly without taking a breath.

“Oh right, I forgot, sorry.” Said Harry, and he drew himself into an official looking stance, even as his eyes started to drift around the room, “I, Harry James Potter, Head of House Potter and Head of House Black, do hereby reject the Marriage Contract Proposal for Lavender Jade Brown and all that it entails. Thus, it is null and void.”

As soon as the official speech was over, the young man’s shoulders slumped, his head tilted as he regarded the relieved girl in front of him, “Your elbows are quite lovely.”

Lavender giggled to herself and sat back to enjoy the spectacle of an out-of-his-mind Boy-Who-Lived. When her hour was up and Hannah knocked on the door, Harry was finally coming out of his stupor and she was able to stop laughing long enough to catch her breath.

“Hey, Hannah,” greeted Lavender, “I don’t know what that dose is going to do to him, but mine was bloody hilarious. I’m going to go catch up with Ron. Good luck. See you, Harry!”

“Hello, Harry,” said the blonde Hufflepuff a bit stiffly.

“Hannah,” answered the wizard, “come in. We might as well get this over with. I apologize ahead of time for anything I might say or do. Feel free to laugh, though.” He then grabbed the goblet from her hands and, with a deep breath, gulped it down once more. It never did get easier for him.

Instead of convulsing, this time, he just sank bonelessly back into the bed, his green eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. Hannah nervously sat in the chair beside the bed and asked, “Is this supposed to happen?”

“No idea,” came the reply. It was unnerving to the girl because Harry’s mouth barely moved and the tone was almost completely flat. “The other two were much more painful, though it did feel good when Katie rubbed my back.”

“Oh,” was all the young woman could think to say. She sat and fidgeted in her chair for a few moments until Harry spoke again.

“So,” he said, “are we going to sit awkwardly in silence, or are you going to tell me what’s on your mind?”

“Blunt,” said Hannah with a frown on her face.

“I’m sorry,” Harry replied, “I wouldn’t normally be that rude. Apparently the potion...encourages me to speak my mind.”

The blonde sighed and said, “It’s alright. You were right, anyway; I do have something on my mind.”

“And...” said the young man, in a tone that was obviously asking for more. Hannah got the impression that, if possible, he would have been motioning for her to continue as well.

“I don’t think you’re good enough for Susan,” she suddenly blurted, “she deserves someone who can devote all of his attention to her. She shouldn’t have to share with six others.”

“I agree completely,” said Harry, shocking Hannah, “Susan does deserve far better than me. She deserves everything you said and more. I agree that I’m not the guy that can give that to her. If I had my way, she would stay as far away from me as possible, as would the others. Unfortunately, it’s not up to either of us and she, for some reason, wants to stick around.”

Susan’s best friend let out a deep sigh and said, “I know, and she’d slaughter us if we even tried to convince her to stay away. I just wanted to get your measure; see if you were just messing her about.”

“So, I’ve got a 71 cm inseam,” Harry said, “how do I measure up?”

The blonde stared at the prone young man and said flatly, “You’re a good man with a crap sense of humour.”

The rest of the hour for the two passed amicably with the start of what could be a friendship developing. Near the end of the time with Hannah, Harry’s eyes started drooping and it was obviously harder and harder for him to keep up the conversation. He was just about asleep when Parvati knocked on his door and entered.

“My turn, Hannah,” said the Gryffindor, “Hermione decided to test if the cure was working yet or not. Hi Harry!”

Emerald eyes snapped open for a moment and he stared long and hard at his House-mate. “Hi Parvati,” the wizard said, “I don’t know if it’s working or if I can just tell between you and your sister, but...” He was unable to finish his sentence as he fell back to sleep.

“Looks like my shift is going to be easy,” said Parvati and she settled in the chair and pulled a Witch Weekly from her bag, “luckily, I brought something to read.”

“Have fun,” said Hannah as she left.

Harry slept for the next two hours without making a sound. It was in the middle of Padma’s turn, which came after both Dean and Seamus, when the Boy-Who-Lived’s eyes snapped open and he finished his sentence, “the vision isn’t popping up.”

“Huh,” asked Padma from her seat, “Harry! You’re awake!”

“I was asleep?” He asked, bewildered.

“For almost three hours, how do you feel?” The Ravenclaw had pulled out a piece of parchment and a quill, looking ready to take notes.

“I feel...” Harry shifted his body around for several minutes and concentrated, “odd. Very odd. It’s like I’m not quite connected to my body. Very strange feeling.”

“So, is the cure working?” She continued her interrogation as she copied down his answer.

“It is!” Exclaimed Harry, “I can still feel the vision trying to force its way into my mind, but it’s easier to hold it off, now.”

“Excellent,” Padma exclaimed, “that means that our cure is countering the effects of the Vision of Truth potion, then it will expel the potion itself from your body.”

“That doesn’t sound pleasant,” said the raven-haired young man as his stomach gurgled loudly.

“I think it’s going to start, soon,” she said as she took more notes.

“Me too!” said Harry and he leapt from his bed and made a dash for the loo.

Padma checked her watch and marked in her notes, “Approximately two hundred and seventy two minutes after the final potion is taken.” She winced at the sound of retching echoing from the bathroom.

As Harry was voiding his stomach of its contents, Padma had rejoined those who didn’t have class at the moment in the common room.

“How is he?” asked Luna from her seat beside Hermione at one of the tables. The brunette also looked up, eager for the response. The rest of Harry’s friends had either class or other responsibilities and were out of the room.

“He’s as well as can be expected, now that the purging has actually started,” said the dark haired Ravenclaw with a shrug, “he said that he was able to look at me without being overwhelmed by the memories.”

“That means the cure is working!” Exclaimed Hermione as she stood to go to her best friend, “I’m going to see him.” Her progress was stopped by a warm hand firmly, but gently grabbing her wrist.

The Gryffindor looked down into the blue eyes of her blonde Ravenclaw friend, startled that anyone would try to keep her from Harry. “Not yet, Hermione,” said Luna, serenely, “let his stomach settle a bit first. I doubt he would want any of us there while he was getting sick.”

Sighing, Hermione nodded and sat, ready to wait even longer to see her friend. It would be nearly dinner before Harry gave the go ahead for people to see him, though he refused to leave the bathroom for long. He didn't know how long his stomach would remain settled and didn't want to get sick anywhere else.

This was why, when Harry finally declared himself fit to be seen, Hermione immediately rushed into the bathroom and sat by the wizard on the floor next to the toilet. She clearly wanted to crush him in a hug, but realized that embracing a queasy person was not the best plan. Padma and Luna followed at a more sedate pace and, after seeing how Harry was doing, told the two Gryffindors that they would be back after the feast and that they would inform the others of Harry's status.

When they were alone again, the wizard chuckled wearily and said, "Another Halloween, another loo. Seems to be a pattern with us, eh, Hermione?"

The young witch laughed a bit and replied, "At least there isn't a troll, this time."

The two settled into a comfortable silence, with Hermione simply resting her head on Harry's shoulder. The need to constantly speak when they were together had faded away during the long hours of training for the Tri-Wizard Tournament in fourth year. The two now were able to get as much comfort from each other by simply being together as they would from talking for hours.

The rest of the evening and into the next morning, Hermione did not leave her best friend's side, even as he never left the bathroom. The rest of the group filtered in and out all night as well, but nothing could get Hermione to move. A nice cushioning charm, placed by Harry, had everyone sitting in relative comfort.

The teen boy was eternally grateful for Hermione's presence whenever he would get sick again. She would sit silently and rub his back as he emptied his stomach into the toilet. He didn't speak his thanks, but she could see it in his eyes and could feel it when he would softly squeeze her hand. The young woman would just smile

softly and wipe his mouth with a cloth or hit him with a breath-freshening charm.

In the morning, it was both Hermione and Ron that helped Harry into the hospital wing, and he needed every bit of their help. He was dehydrated and weak from vomiting all night, and his head hurt so badly that he could barely stand. Madam Pomfrey was ready for them, though, and greeted the three teens by saying, "You know where to put him."

The school healer quickly had the Gryffindor wizard on his way back to full health by forcing several potions down his throat. A pain reliever took care of the headache, a greenish blue potion helped his dehydration and a dreamless sleep potion would take care of the exhaustion.

Harry was given a clean bill of health and was sent on his way to dinner that night, though Pomfrey couldn't help but throw a last verbal jab at him, "I'll be seeing you tomorrow, no doubt."

"Huh?" was the intelligent response from the oft-injured Boy-Who-Lived.

"If I am not mistaken, Mr. Potter, tomorrow is Saturday and you have a Quidditch match," answered Poppy. "I don't think you've played a single one of those blasted games without coming to visit me afterwards. Bloody fool sport."

Harry frowned and said, "I'm not that bad."

Ron, Hermione, Luna, and Ginny, who were with him, all laughed and pulled their friend out with him, despite his protests of not getting injured that often. He grumbled all the way to the Great Hall until he saw the rest of his friends sitting together at the Hufflepuff table. His faux grumpiness fell away quickly as he looked forward to, after almost a full week of eating alone, enjoying a peaceful meal with his friends.

He sat with Hermione on his left and Luna on his right and facing the Ravenclaw table. This is why he saw the frantic whispering of Su Li

into Lisa Turpin's ear and the crazed look on Lisa's face as she rose to stand on her table.

"Lisa," whisper-shouted Su as she grabbed at her friend's robes, "get down, what are you doing?!?" The girl was mortified when Lisa, instead of following the tugging of her robes, threw them off and onto her friend. The attention of everyone in the Great Hall snapped to the dark haired Ravenclaw, since she was wearing absolutely nothing under her robes.

She bent down at the knees, giving everybody behind her a view of something that most had only seen in the type of publications that Ron kept hidden under his mattress, and scooped up two large handfuls of the mashed potatoes that had been served with dinner. In a loud, clear voice, and while spreading the food all over her body, she declared, "I am the Mashed Potato Queen! All shall bow before me and tremble! TREMBLE!"

She blinked and looked around at everyone staring at her in shock. Even the teachers at the front of the Hall were too shocked to move. "Why are you not trembling? Why do you not cower before my terrible glory?! Ah," the girl continued to shout, "it is because you do not see my true face! Look upon it and weep!!"

Suddenly, the scene went from just about every male's -- and some female's -- wet dream to a bloody nightmare. Lisa raised her hands to her face and started scratching at her skin, immediately drawing blood. The Ravenclaw sixth year appeared to want to peel her own skin off, laughing gaily the whole time.

Lisa turned around to let the rest of the Hall bask in her terrible glory and, as soon as Luna saw the girl's back, she gasped. At the same time, Professor Dumbledore had broken out of her stupor and was casting a stunner at the girl to get her to stop. The blonde Ravenclaw reacted as well; she stood and cast Protego, to block the red spell.

"Luna, what..." Hermione started to ask, but the strange blonde wasn't paying attention. She was already moving; she stood from her seat and grabbed a platter of chicken and leapt from her table to Lisa's. As soon as she was close enough, the small blonde swung

the heavy platter with surprising strength into the face of the crazed witch.

A deafening silence filled the Great Hall after the thud of Lisa's body hitting the table. It was broken by a shocked Deputy Headmistress, "Miss Lovegood! Explain yourself, NOW!"

Calmly, as if she were discussing the weather, Luna said, “Any magical means of subduing her would have killed her.” She rolled the naked, bleeding girl onto her stomach, and pointed to a long, brown tube that seemed to be attached to the sixth year girl just below her skull. “Somehow, a Kenyan Centipedal Mind-Eater got into the castle and attached itself to Lisa. The only way to help her would be to put her under a stasis charm. Harry, if you would, please.”

The wizard in question blinked once and, showing his complete trust in the girl, did as asked with a wave of his wand. Meanwhile, the Headmaster had rushed down the aisle between the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor tables. His no longer twinkling blue eyes quickly assessed the situation before he said, “Young Miss Lovegood is quite right, if my stunner had connected, Miss Turpin would be dead. Poppy, contact some of your friends at Saint Mungo’s; we will need to transfer her there immediately. Fifty points to Ravenclaw for your excellent assessment and reaction, Miss Lovegood. Prefects, lead the students back to your common rooms.”

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The excitement of the events at dinner the previous night had fallen into the background due to the excitement of a Saturday Quidditch match. The fact that it was the legendary Gryffindor versus Slytherin rivalry made it that much more exciting.

And that much more nerve racking for Ron, who was standing in front of his teammates having just given his pre-game speech. He knew that he was at least somewhat successful by the anticipatory gleam in his players' eyes. He knew that every last one of them would play their hearts out for him. All he had to do was not let them down.

“Mount up, it's time.” he said and followed as the rest of his team flew out onto the field. He couldn't help but laugh as he heard the roar of the lion hats being worn by Harry's girls.

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“The Gryffindor Chasers are really flying well, today,” Colin Creevey said from the announcer's box, “the Slytherins haven't had an answer for them all day. We're into the second hour of this match and BELL SCORES AGAIN! Katie Bell made a beautiful move to get around the Slytherin Keeper to put the Lions up one hundred forty to eighty. It looks like Gryffindor Captain Ron Weasley's decision to rely on his team's skill was a good one as the sheer brutality of the Slytherin game plan doesn't seem to be affecting them.”

Harry looked down at the game going on below him. He was circling high above the pitch, searching for the ever elusive snitch which hadn't made an appearance yet that day. Malfoy, as always, was tailing him, though instead of looking down for the snitch as he normally did, the blonde Slytherin was constantly looking at the overcast sky above them.

The Gryffindor Seeker frowned down at the play that was going on below him. The Slytherin Chasers were quickly making their way toward Ron, but the redheaded Keeper was too busy dodging the Bludgers that were being sent his way. The raven-haired wizard decided to see if he could have a little fun with Malfoy while breaking up the play at the same time and quickly forced his Firebolt into a dive.

Harry's smirk grew when he heard Draco curse and follow him. He aimed his broom for the exact spot where he would intersect the advancing Slytherin Chasers' path. Out of the corner of his eye, the diving Seeker could see the lead Slytherin Chaser miss the pass headed his way when he had to pull up to miss Malfoy.

He heard Colin's cry of “And Weasley intercepts the Quaffle and is headed the other way! Great distraction play by Potter followed by a perfect Wronski Feint by Harry! Malfoy had fallen for it, but was just able to pull out in time. Great flying by both players.”

Harry was about to pull up and continue his search, when he saw a glint of light at the bottom of the left-most Slytherin goal. He repositioned his broom and was off like a dart after the golden snitch. It would take a nifty bit of flying to grab the winged ball without hitting either the ground or the post, but the emerald eyed wizard continued on, undaunted.

The problem solved itself when the snitch seemed to understand that it was being chased and shot straight up into the sky, followed quickly by Harry, and closely behind him, Draco. Harry was quickly gaining, the higher they went and when he was just a few hundred feet below the cloud cover, he closed his hand around the shining Snitch winning the game.

The win, though, lost all meaning when Harry realized what he saw reflected on the side of the highly polished golden ball. He quickly looked up to his left and his jaw dropped.

There, coming out of the clouds was a pillar of flames followed by the largest dragon the wizard had ever seen and it was headed straight for him.

Chapter 20:

Blaise held her breath, clenched her fists and stared wide-eyed as Harry dove at break-neck speeds straight for the ground, again. She squeaked when he barely dodged the Bludger that was hit at his head, causing it to hit the Slytherin Chaser that he was flying in front of. The young woman only released her breath when the Gryffindor Seeker pulled out of his dive, his robes scraping across the grass. She didn't even care that Malfoy didn't pull up in time.

Her body slumped and she released the breath she was holding as Harry began circling the Pitch again. She cheered along with the other Gryffindors as the lion hat that Luna had provided roared and she was once again surprised at how easily she and the other Slytherin girls were accepted and at how much fun she was having. When Blaise glanced to her right, she rolled her eyes at the knowing smirk that Tracey was wearing. The other girl wore that same knowing smirk as they talked the night before.

"So," said Tracey as she lay in bed with her girlfriend, "do you think it's time to talk about what's going on with you and Harry?"

Blaise winced, then nodded, "There's no sense in hiding it now, especially after Hermione called me out like that in front of everyone."

"Hm," said the dark haired girl, "not to subtle, that. But then again, she's still a Gryffindor and it was effective. So, how bad is it? Are you falling for him like the rest of us, or are you just lusting?"

"Falling for!?" asked Blaise, panicked. "Rest of us? What-?" She looked at her girlfriend with a wild, animal in a corner look in her ice blue eyes.

"Oh, stop," chastised Tracey. "You're normally much more observant than this. You must have your head shoved further up your arse than I thought."

"Hey," said the blonde witch weakly. "I'm not that bad."

“Apparently you are, if you haven’t noticed how everyone feels. It’s as plain as day.” The cinnamon eyed girl raised a perfectly manicured hand and started ticking off her fingers as she spoke, “Susan has plainly stated, several times and at length that she wants Harry so much that she doesn’t care if she has to share. Padma has pretty much said the same, though she has taken to exploring with Luna until the time comes to pursue boy wonder. We’ve known since Daphne and Hermione started dating that Hermione has fancied Harry.”

“It was just as much as a surprise to them as it was to us when they started seeing each other,” said Blaise as she remembered, “I guess she hasn’t given up that old flame, though.”

“I doubt she ever will,” agreed Tracey. She then continued, pushing down her ring finger, “Luna, the loveable little nut, all but drools over Harry whenever she gets a chance, though she hides it better than most. Dear Daphne has only recently started falling, though she is falling hard. The dirty things that I overheard she and Hermione whisper about doing to Harry together were absolutely delicious.”

“And by “overheard” you mean, listening to them shag with an extendable ear,” snarked Blaise.

The black haired Slytherin shrugged cutely and said airily, “Guilty.”

“And what about you?” Tracey easily picked up the fear that was in her girlfriend’s voice, “What is your great analysis for yourself?”

The brown eyed girl smiled and pulled her obviously frightened and insecure girlfriend closer and spoke in a reassuring tone, “You do know that whatever feelings develop between myself and Harry and you and Harry, I will always, always, love you. You have been my best friend, my lover, my rock and my hope for as long as I can remember and nothing will take me from you. Whatever happens with Harry and the others simply adds on to the love we share with each other. But, you already knew that, didn’t you? You didn’t get worried or upset when we were with Daphne or Hermione, or when we shared Luna. What makes this different?”

Blaise blushed and buried her face into Tracey's neck, taking comfort in her lover's words for a moment before she answered, "I've never been attracted to a man before. I was afraid that it would change things between us."

Tracey chuckled and pulled her naked girlfriend closer, "I've never been attracted to a man before, either. In fact, I'm still not attracted to men in general. There's just something about Harry that makes him quite desirable, don't you think?" Her chuckle turned into a laugh when she felt her girlfriend emphatically nod against her neck.

Reluctantly, Blaise pulled back to look Tracey in the eye, "Why are you not surprised at all to hear that I'm falling for Harry, too?"

The black haired girl continued laughing as she answered, "Because, you silly girl, you treated him exactly the way you treated me just after we kissed for the first ti... You kissed him! You kissed him and didn't even tell me about it, you utter slag!" There was no sting in her words, since she was smiling and tickling the other girl, mercilessly. "So," she said, breathless, "when are you going to talk to Harry about this? Apologizing would probably be good, too. You could see he was blaming himself, the noble idiot. Sooner would be better."

"Tomorrow," said the other Slytherin witch, "after the Quidditch match. I'll talk to him then. I promise."

She stopped breathing once more as Harry went into yet another death-wish dive, this time to break up a play by the opposing Chasers, and thought, "I'll talk to him after the game if he bloody survives!" She leaned over Daphne to speak to a harried looking Hermione. "How have you survived six years of this?!?"

Neville leaned in from behind her and explained, "After the Dementor game in third year, we've taken to slipping her small doses of Calming Draught before the games. Actually, I'm surprised she hasn't detected them."

"Oh, I have," replied Hermione, not taking her eyes off of Harry, "I just thought it was incredibly thoughtful. So, thank you."

The Longbottom scion laughed and said, "Anytime, Hermione. I don't know why we thought we were pulling one over on you; it's impossible."

Professor McGonagall glanced down at the smiling, laughing faces of Harry's closest and most trusted friends and shook her head at the diverse group of students. She was amazed at the young wizard's ability to gather a group of people together that were so different and still have them all live peaceably together. She was also amazed at the young lad's awe-inspiring flying abilities as he shot straight up into the air, hand extended, as he tried to catch the snitch.

The normally stern teacher allowed herself a moment of unprofessional joy at having beaten Severus' snakes, yet again. Her moment was shortened considerably, though, when she saw the fireball appear out of the cloud cover and she gasped along with the rest of the stadium when it was followed by an enormous dragon. Every student, teacher, and faculty member was absolutely motionless as they watched Harry skilfully, but still barely, dodge out of the way of the magical flame and just miss the claws and tail of the beast. A second later, they heard his magically amplified voice echo across the grounds.

"What the bloody hell are you people waiting for?!? Get out!" He screamed, "Anyone who knows the Flame Freezing charm, be ready. Stay in a large group and move quickly, the dragon will look for stragglers and injured prey. Flyers, cover them from above and pick up anyone who falls. Teachers, do your bloody jobs. I'm going to try and distract it and keep it in the air. Bombarda! Up here you bloody dragon!"

The curse, which Harry put quite a bit of power into, hit the dragon in the back of the head and caused it to let out an enraged roar. The great beast flapped its leathery wings twice; turning it around and sending it racing after the flying Gryffindor. "Oh, fuck!" Harry's voice boomed, before he cancelled the spell with a silent Finite.

The sound of Boy-Who-Lived swearing finally brought the crowd out of their stupor and they all started screaming and running. Prefects and teachers did their best to keep order and prevent injury, but the

sheer terror of having an angry dragon flying overhead kept them from being too effective. The sound of the screaming students, though, was enough to get the dragon's attention once more, and it dove down to pick off any of the students that it could.

It was denied a meal once more as the curses and hexes bounced off its scaled, spell-resistant skin. The curses were not doing any physical damage to the beast, just annoying it greatly. Harry was not so lucky when he caught the dragon's attention again. Each time he pulled the Ukrainian Ironbelly's attention away, he would get singed by straying too close to the flame, or get sliced by one of its claws or tail.

The Gryffindor Quidditch team was doing as Harry asked; they flew low over the crowd of students and swooped down to pick up any that fell. If the student was injured, the flier would rush them back to the castle. The Slytherin Quidditch team, though, had bolted back to the castle at the first opportunity, much to the disgust of the other students.

Millicent Bulstrode was quickly falling behind the mass of students running the half kilometre back to the castle. The large girl could neither run fast nor run long and she knew that, as she was already winded and the gap between her and the rest of the students was increasing. The Slytherin knew that if she fell too far behind and Potter got killed by the dragon, she would be lunch to the great lizard.

There were already small fires all along the path back to the castle from where the dragon had sent great fire balls down to the earth. Luckily, there were no direct hits and the other students were able to cast the Flame Freezing charm on the fire before anyone got burned too badly. The crowd screamed as another fireball hit the earth near them, sending charred earth flying into the air.

Millicent narrowed her eyes at one of the higher pitched screams that she heard. She quickly scanned the group of students in front of her and finally saw who she was looking for. The little bint Adelaide Stevenson was running as fast as her little legs could carry her, though she too was not as fast as the other students. Seeing an

opportunity to both take out one of Potter's supporters and save her own hide, the massive witch fired a tripping hex at the first year girl.

The little blonde girl tripped and fell when the curse hit home and the sixth year girl quickly caught up and stomped with all her might onto the eleven-year-old's leg, easily snapping it in two. The young girl cried out in pain, but Millicent ignored it and kept running. She smirked when she saw that there were no more students on brooms to come back and save the girl that was making enough noise to attract the dragon.

Most of the students were just about back at the castle when Blaise stopped and looked up. Harry was still frantically battling the massive dragon, though he was obviously injured. She was about to turn and head into the castle to find Tracey and the others when Millicent Bulstrode passed her, out of breath and laughing to herself. A chill went down the sixth year girl's spine at the thought of Millie finding something funny at a time like this; that generally meant that someone was hurt. Sure enough, the sounds of high pitched crying reached Blaise's ears and she saw little Adelaide frantically clawing her way along the ground back to the castle, her left leg bent ninety degrees the wrong way.

Without a second's thought of the danger, Blaise raced back out of the safety of the stone castle to help the severely injured first year. Unfortunately, the sound of the girl's whimpering reached the flying predator's ears at the same time and it flapped its massive wings to turn itself around and dive at the easy prey. Harry was too close to the dragon and was clipped by one of the wings, separating him from his broom.

Tracey was frantic as she searched the crowd for her girlfriend. It seemed that all of the other students were back safely and the staff were deciding how to deal with the dragon, but Blaise was nowhere to be found.

"Oh Merlin, Blaise," gasped Hermione as she spotted the wayward girl crouching over a first year. A roar from the dragon let those watching know that it had noticed the two easy targets sitting away from the rest.

“Harry!” shouted Luna when she saw the free-falling wizard. She watched as he waved his wand, causing his broom to snap back into his hand, and immediately dove for the ground. Harry landed in between the dragon and the two girls seconds after the beast did and held both hands out, palms facing outward, only to be completely engulfed in flames.

“No!” screamed several voices as though they were being tortured.

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Harry knew that several ribs had been broken when the dragon's wing clipped him; the pain stole his breath away. He also knew that he was as good as dead, since he could no longer manoeuvre away from the giant beast. The emerald eyed wizard saw at the same time the Ironbelly did the two witches that had been separated from the group, one of them obviously injured. The dragon roared and immediately descended to the ground. Swearing profusely, again, Harry called his Firebolt to him with a thought and the wave of his wand and shot to the ground as fast as he could.

During his descent, the raven-haired wizard recognized the two witches as Blaise and Adelaide and his desperation to protect them increased tenfold. He touched down so soon after the dragon did that he could still feel the impact tremor in the soles of his shoes. Harry saw the dragon take an immense breath in and knew that a river of magical flame was headed his way. Instinctively, he braced his feet as if he were going to push a massively heavy object and extended his hands, palms toward the dragon and forced his magic out with all of his might.

The force of the flame hitting Harry's impromptu shield actually caused the teen to slide back several feet, though it held. He could hear the terrified screams of the two young women behind him, but paid them no attention. All of his focus, all of his power, his entire being was focused on holding off the river of magical flame that was flowing around his shield, pressing as hard as it could to get in. Though most of the fire was held at bay, enough heat broke through that Harry could feel the palms of his hands blistering and burning

and the sleeves of his robes smouldering. Just as he thought he couldn't hold out any longer, the pressure stopped. The young wizard dropped his arms and the shield at the same time, wobbled for a moment, then fell face first into the scorched ground, unconscious.

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Half a second after the dragon let loose its flame-filled breath, Headmaster Dumbledore began speaking into the deathly silent crowd. "Anyone who can, cast a Stupefy at the head of the dragon. On three. One," students and teachers moved quickly to obtain a decent enough view to aim at the head of the beast. "Two," wands raised and took aim, "Three." Close to eighty students and teachers simultaneously said, "Stupefy," and the surrounding area was bathed in a red light as the spells sped down the grounds to connect with the fire-breather's head.

While the hide of a dragon is nearly impervious to spellfire, and the Ukrainian Ironbelly's even more so, the force of eighty stunning charms hitting the beast straight in the head was enough to knock it unconscious. It was also enough to knock the six ton animal onto its back. The students watched in amazed silence as the flames stopped and the three magical children appeared alive and, mostly, unharmed. Then Harry fell to the ground.

"Injured students should be immediately helped to the Hospital Wing. Prefects, escort the rest of your students back to your dormitories. Miss Granger, if you and your fellow consorts could help and collect Ms. Zabini, Ms. Stevenson, and Mr. Potter and escort them to the Hospital Wing as well, it would be greatly appreciated."

He needn't have said the last, though, as Hermione and the rest of the consorts, Padma and Susan included, as well as the entire Gryffindor Quidditch team, were running full tilt down the path to where Harry, Blaise, and Adelaide lay. The elderly Headmaster turned to his Deputy and said, "Minerva, please stay with the students in the Hospital Wing, I shall bind our wayward dragon and contact Charlie Weasley to gather a team to come and collect it."

“Oh, honestly, Albus,” snarked the Gryffindor Head of House as she marched resolutely toward Madam Pomfrey's domain, “where d'ye think I'd be? Having tea with the Minister?”

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When Harry woke later that evening, he felt no pain, which was highly surprising to the young man, considering the injuries he sustained the night before. His natural reaction to waking up in the Hospital Wing, which he could tell he was in, was generally to peak his eye open and ask what happened. It generally got the conversation started in a calm, clear manner.

Unfortunately for Harry, the amount of pain killers that were flowing through his blood stream at the moment caused the signals from his brain to become muddled. Instead of waking up calmly, the young man's eyes popped open comically wide as he sat up straight in bed and shouted, “GYAR!!!!” Then he flopped back down to the mattress. This had the effect of causing the students around his bed to jump and let out high pitched shrieks, including Ron.

“What,” the redhead said, defensively, “I don't like pirates almost as much as I don't like spiders.” When the remaining students that were gathered continued to stare incredulously, including his girlfriend, he tried to deflect by saying, “Harry's awake!”

Before his friends could make too much of a commotion, Madam Pomfrey bustled over from where she was attending another student and said, “You lot have been in here enough to know the rules. If you make too much noise, you'll have to leave. Now,” the school Healer said, turning to the young man, who was staring in awe at his heavily bandaged hand, “let's have a look at you.”

Hermione, as was her routine each time Harry was in the Hospital Wing, grabbed his glasses off of the bedside table and slid them on his face. Instead of receiving the familiar response of a grateful smile and a “thank you” from the injured wizard, she instead received a heavily bandaged hand pawing roughly at her face.

“Harry!” the stunned brunette sputtered as the teens around her laughed.

“Ah,” said Dumbledore as he strode into the room, “I see young Mr. Potter is awake. How is he doing Poppy?”

“I would be able to tell you, Headmaster,” snapped the Healer as she glared at everyone crowding around the bed, “if I were given enough space to complete my examination without interruption!”

The ice in the older woman's voice was enough to have all of the students, as well as the Headmaster himself, take two steps back and stand quietly. Pomfrey nodded once and got back to work.

After a few moments, she began explaining what she saw, “I haven't seen him this banged up since the end of that ruddy tournament. He has four broken ribs, which will be completely healed by morning, though that area will remain tender for several days. He has many small lacerations that will heal on their own and four larger cuts that I have cleaned out and sealed: one across his chest, one across his back, one down his right biceps and one down the back of his left leg. They should also be completely healed by morning. He has several spots of first and second degree burns that should also be healed by morning.”

“Well,” said Padma, who was standing between Susan and Ron, “that's not too bad.”

The redheaded boy just shook his head sadly. “That's not the last of it,” he said, “Madam Pomfrey always saves the worst injuries for last when it comes to Harry. I think it's so we have time to brace ourselves.”

Unaware of the side conversation, Poppy continued, “His hands and forearms have some of the worst third degree burns I have ever seen. The skin on his palms was almost completely burned away. They will be healed completely, though they will take significantly longer than the other injuries.”

“How much longer, Madam?” asked Luna politely.

“That depends on how well my treatment plan works,” the Matron admitted. “Best case scenario has him removing the bandages after a week. It may take longer, though.”

“Is he going to have to spend the whole week in here?” Ron asked, knowing how much his friend hated staying in the Hospital Wing.

“No, Mr. Weasley,” replied the Healer, “he will not have to stay here all week. Not that I could keep him here anyway. It will be sufficient for Mr. Potter to come in twice a day to soak his hands and arms in a special burn salve for an hour each time and so his bandages can be changed. That should take care of his physical injuries.”

“Physical injuries, Poppy?” asked the Headmaster. “Does he have another type of ailment?”

The school nurse nodded her head curtly and said, “Mr. Potter is severely magically exhausted, which is why he has fallen asleep again. I doubt he could cast a Lumos spell at all. I don't want him using any kind of magic whatsoever for at least three days. Is that clear?” Her tone allowed no argument as she looked into each student's eyes until they nodded their acquiescence.

“Good,” she said, “now, if there are no more questions, you can all go back to your dorms and allow my patients to get their rest. You can come back in the morning; he should be awake after breakfast.”

The Healer roused Harry and handed him a Dreamless Sleep Potion to ensure that he slept the whole night through without any restlessness. At the same time, his friends were ushered out of the room by the Headmaster.

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When Blaise led the rest of the Consorts, this included Padma and Susan who were thought of as Harry's Consorts by the rest of the school, into the Hospital Wing the next morning they found that they were not the first to arrive. Grace, Adelaide and their two friends Jessica and Aubrey were gathered around the injured wizard's bed

watching with slightly green faces as Madam Pomfrey reapplied the bandages to Harry's hands. The young man was nodding to whatever the Healer was telling him, though his slumped shoulders showed that he didn't like what he heard.

"A whole week?" he asked a bit petulantly. "What am I supposed to do with no hands for a whole week? How am I supposed to eat? Or change my clothes?"

"Oh, please," said Susan as the witches surrounded Harry's bed and placed reassuring hands on whatever body part they could find that was not bandaged, but was still acceptable in front of four first years. "Like you'll have any problem finding volunteers to help you take your clothes off."

"Why," added Padma, "you've got seven eager witches already queued up, ready to answer your every beck and call."

"Especially the ones that involve pants removal," snarked Daphne, earning a round of giggles from the first year girls.

Any protests, half-hearted as they might have been, died on the raven-haired wizard's lips when Luna leaned down from her spot by his right shoulder and whispered into his ear. "You've done everything in your considerable power to take care of us and keep us as happy as we can be. And you've done an amazing job at that. I haven't felt so loved or at home since my mother died. Please, Harry, let us return the favour."

Emerald eyes stared into pale blue and Harry could only smile slightly and nod. "Thank you," the young woman said and kissed his cheek right at the corner of his mouth.

"Well then," said Madam Pomfrey, "now that I see you're in good hands, I will let you escape my clutches for now. I want you back here immediately after dinner, though, for your next treatment and so I can change your bandages. Ladies, make sure he doesn't use his hands and under no circumstances is he to use magic until I permit it." The Hospital Wing Matron received nods from the seven girls and turned to the injured first year. "Now, Miss Stevenson, if you would kindly

return to your bed. I will examine your leg and then you may go as well."

The group of older witches and wizard all said goodbye to their younger friends and headed back to their common room, where they were met by another group of students. The rest of the sixth year Gryffindors, plus Ginny and Hannah had congregated outside Haleigh's portrait and seemed to be waiting for Harry to show up.

"Hey guys," the injured wizard said, "come on in and get comfortable. I'll see if we can have lunch brought up to us. I'm not yet in the mood to deal with the rest of the student population."

The large group of teens sat in silence for a long moment, before it was broken, as usual, by Ron, "Why the bloody hell did a dragon attack the Quidditch match?"

"Language, Ron," scolded three voices. Hermione, Ginny, and Lavender exchanged amused smirks with each other as the redhead blushed and grumbled to himself.

Harry decided to take pity on his friend and drew the attention away by answering the question, "I'll give you one guess as to who could have sent the dragon."

Neville paled and said, "You-Know-Who attacked us with a dragon?!"

The Boy-Who-Lived snorted derisively and when he noticed the occupants of the room staring at him, said, "That wasn't an attack. That was a reminder."

"A reminder?" asked a shaky sounding Hannah. Neville quickly grasped his girlfriend's hand and squeezed it to reassure her.

Surprisingly, it was Daphne, not Harry, that answered, "A reminder that he is still out there. That he hasn't forgotten about us and that he can get at us whenever he wants."

"Yes, exactly," said Harry, "it also creates more chaos within the school, which will help cover up what his true plans are. Takes attention away from his operatives inside the castle, too."

"What makes you think that he's got operatives in the castle?" asked Parvati.

"C'mon, Parv," said Seamus, "how many Tibetan Centi-whattal Mind Hoogie thingies have you seen before?"

"Kenyan Centipedal Mind Eater," corrected Luna, "but otherwise, Seamus is quite right. The Mind Eater cannot survive in Scotland's climate without a host. It had to have been delivered. Most likely, it was brought into the castle during the last Hogsmeade weekend."

"Katie's friend did provide a pretty big distraction when she grabbed George's necklace," supplied Ginny.

"There is also the fact that my father ordered me to be a spy for the Dark Lord," admitted Blaise.

Immediately the Gryffindors, other than Hermione, Ginny, Harry, and Neville, began shouting their displeasure and indignation. Seamus and Dean went so far as to draw their wands, though Dean's was quickly plucked from his hand by the youngest Weasley.

"Would you guys just cut it out?" shouted Neville, easily silencing the others. "It's obvious she said no and that Harry knew about it!"

"How do you figure, Nev?" asked Ron.

"Well, first is the fact that she told us about it," replied the Longbottom scion, stuttering a bit as the attention of the room was focused on him, "W-what kind of idiot spy goes to the group they're spying on and says 'Did you know I'm giving all your secrets to your enemy?' Second, it's obvious by the lack of surprise that Harry knew about his all along, and since he's comfortable enough to have Blaise sitting next to him when he's all but helpless shows that he still trusts her. And if Harry trusts her, it's good enough for me."

“Wow, Neville,” said Hermione, “I'm impressed.” Hannah kissed him firmly on the lips to show her agreement with the bookworm's statement.

“Thanks, Hermione,” shyly replied the young man when he could breathe again.

“Oh, right,” said Seamus as he put away his wand. “Er, sorry Blaise.”

The blonde Slytherin waved off the Irish boy's apology, saying, “It's perfectly alright, Finnegan, you wouldn't be Gryffindors if you didn't act rashly and without thinking every once in a while.”

“Hey, that's-” protested Dean, only to be cut off by the redheaded girl who was sitting on his lap.

“Extremely accurate,” said Ginny. “Now, if we've finished glaring at people who don't deserve it, lunch appears to have been served.”

Sure enough, a veritable mountain of bite-sized foods appeared on the tables that lined the common room walls.

“Thanks, Dobby and Winky,” chorused the teens into thin air as they sat down to eat.

“Wow,” Seamus said as he watched Padma and Susan feed a red-faced Harry. “What do I need to do to get that kind of service?”

“Oh, it's easy,” replied Luna airily as she re-arranged the food on her plate into a fairly accurate depiction of Harry, “you just need to have your hands nearly burned off fighting a dragon. I'm sure we can arrange it for you.” She put an exclamation on the end of her sentence by kissing “Harry's” lips, then eating them.

Parvati rolled her eyes and, none-too-gently, stuffed a mini-sandwich into the gaping mouth of the gobsmacked Irish wizard. “How's this for service?”

The teens spent the rest of the afternoon laughing and relaxing in the massively comfortable common room. Katie Bell stopped by for a

short time, but her busy schedule reviewing for her NEWT tests didn't allow for much social time. Finally, when dinner rolled around, Harry decided to muster his courage and eat in the Great Hall with everyone else.

He knew someone was going to say something about his situation, and he wasn't disappointed when the nasally voice of Draco Malfoy sounded out behind him.

"So, it's true," the aristocratic blonde said, "the Great Potty is completely helpless. You have to rely on a bunch of Mudblood and Blood Traitor whores to do anything. I wonder what would happen if I were to curse you right here."

"What would happen, Mr. Malfoy, is that you would find your wand snapped and yourself expelled faster than you could blink," snapped the voice of a visibly enraged Deputy Headmistress, her lips, when she wasn't speaking, were pressed into a nearly invisibly line. "You would also be on the receiving end of the curses of the nearly two dozen wands that are currently pointed directly at you." Glancing around, the Malfoy scion realized that he was indeed surrounded by angry looking witches and wizards with their wands pointed at him.

"As it is," continued McGonagall, "you will find yourself losing fifty points from Slytherin for threatening another student, twenty points for your appalling language, and serving a month of detention with Mr. Filch. Now, return to your seat and the rest of you, put away your wands."

The Transfiguration teacher stormed her way up to the Head table where she sat and stabbed at the dinner that appeared on her plate. After her display of temper, dinner was a very well mannered affair. Even Ron carefully ate and swallowed every bite of food before speaking.

At the end of the meal, she stood to speak to the gathered students. She had immediate silence as she started, "Many of you are probably wondering where Professor Dumbledore is. He is currently dealing with the aftermath of the events of the Quidditch Match yesterday. He told me to relay to you the message that we are all still as safe within

these walls as we ever have been. Professor Dumbledore will be speaking after dinner tomorrow to detail the additional protections that will be added and how they will affect you. That is all.”

Finally, several hours after he had returned from his appointment with Madam Pomfrey, Harry’s friends began drifting off to their own dorms and beds for the night. As had become the norm, the young wizard was left alone with one of his consorts. This time it was Luna. The blonde girl was sitting sideways on the couch next to the raven haired teen, reclining against him. She had his arm wrapped around her shoulder so that his bandaged hand was resting on her stomach.

The fifth year Transfiguration text was resting on her thighs and she had charmed the sixth year potions text to float in front in Harry’s face. At fairly regular intervals the young witch would flick her wand to turn the page. Harry could not figure out how she knew when he was finished with the page he was on since she was apparently not paying attention to him at all. Eventually, he gave up trying to figure out how Luna did the things she did and just enjoyed spending time with her.

Luna, meanwhile, was not as relaxed as she appeared. While she had the book on her lap open and was occasionally turning pages, she was not reading a word. Her thoughts remained in the conversation she had with her fellow consorts while Harry was with Madam Pomfrey.

“So,” started Susan as soon as Harry had left the room, leaving the consorts by themselves, “are we all ready to admit that everyone here fancies Harry at least in some way?”

Six heads nodded their response, though some were more tentative than others.

“Right then,” the Hufflepuff continued, “erm, what next? Do we all get naked and jump him or what?”

Hermione laughed and said, “Not if you want to actually enjoy it. If we did that, Harry would probably be out of the room before we could actually touch him.”

“What’s the hurry, anyway?” asked Padma, “It’s not like we have to worry about another girl catching his eye. Why not take it slow and enjoy the process?”

“How do we want to do this, then?” queried Tracey, “Do we want to approach him as a group or individually and in what order?”

“I think individually would be best,” suggested Hermione, “it’ll allow him to form each connection individually. It will also allow us to approach him in our own way, since some of us will be a bit more forward than others.” The bushy haired brunette said the last statement while smirking at an unrepentant Susan.

“Right, and what order will we be helping him change clothes and bathe and such?” inquired Blaise. “I think we should just continue with our night-time schedule. So, it’s Luna tonight, then Hermione, then me.”

“All right, Luna?” asked Tracey, once she noticed that the blonde fifth year was even more quiet than usual.

“Oh yes, I’m fine, thank you,” replied the young Ravenclaw, “just hoping that the wrackspurts don’t cloud Harry’s mind when I try to help him tonight.”

But the blonde girl was not all right then and she was not all right now. Behind the mask of Loony Lovegood that she still put up on occasion, or the emotional and mental maturity that she was well known for, Luna was still a fifteen, almost sixteen, year old girl who was about to admit her feelings to the boy that she liked. And then undress him. She was bloody terrified.

Harry yawned for the fourth time in twenty minutes and Luna heard her voice say, “You should rest, Harry. Your core will recover more quickly if you get more sleep at night.” She then felt her body stand and help the older wizard stand and make their way to his rooms. She felt all of this, but was unaware of it as her mind was only focused inward on her fears.

Questions flew nonstop through her mind, causing her nervousness to spike. "What am I supposed to do? Do I admit how I feel first? Do I undress him first? What if he reacts to me undressing him? What if he doesn't react to me undressing him? Will he expect me to ease his tension somehow? I've never even seen one of those before, how am I supposed to know what to do? Oh, Merlin, we're here and he's staring at me."

"Luna," Harry asked, "are you okay? You seem upset about something."

"Oh, no," said the thin blonde girl, "I'm fine. I was just thinking about the Tufted Snuffalumps. Did you know that they can hold their breaths for three days? That's a terribly long time to hold your breath. I'd imagine they would get quite lightheaded by the end."

"Luna," repeated the young man in a voice that was filled with caring and understanding, but was a little bit chastising.

The Ravenclaw knew immediately what the wizard in front of her meant and knew that he was right, so she mustered up her courage and blurted out, "I fancy you and I'm nervous that you don't feel the same way back." Her courage then failed her, so she scrunched her eyes closed and waited.

"You fancy me?" asked a gobsmacked Harry. "What about Padma? I thought the two of you were getting together."

Luna knew that the young wizard felt honesty was very important, so she decided to lay all of the proverbial cards on the table. "We are. She fancies you, too. So do all of the rest of your consorts in some way or another. We're all planning to take this opportunity to show you that we do, and hopefully find out that you feel the same way in return."

"Well," he stammered, "that's... I mean, wow." It was lucky that he was standing at the edge of his massive bed because the young man's knees suddenly gave out and he sat with a thump onto the mattress.

Feeling a little bolder at Harry's apparent nervousness, she pressed, "You can't honestly tell me you haven't noticed. Susan has all but thrown herself at you at times. Unless I am not the only that hides how they feel. Please, Harry, be honest with me."

The young man stared into the open, honest, pale blue eyes that were swimming with emotion. He could easily pick out the fear and absolute trust that she was showing him, as well as the hint of desire within their depths. Instead of letting him answer with words, Luna gently placed her hands on either side of his head and tilted it upwards. She slowly bent forward, never breaking eye contact, giving him plenty of time to deny her. But he didn't.

Their lips touched gently together and rested there. Neither moved for a long moment, until Luna pulled back and stared at Harry. He simply smiled and put his bandaged hand on the back of her head and pulled her in for another, deeper kiss. Their mouths opened and their tongues danced against each other, though the kiss still remained relatively chaste.

They snogged lightly for several minutes until Luna pulled away once more and smiled brightly. "You're still very tired and should rest, Harry," the blonde said, "come, let me help you get changed. What do you normally wear to bed?"

Harry stood and said, "Normally just the pair of shorts that are sitting on the floor, there." The Ravenclaw nodded, and deftly unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans and knelt to pull them to the floor. She looked up and came face to face with a very large tent in the wizard's boxer shorts.

She looked up at the red faced wizard in surprise and he shrugged and said, "I'm a sixteen year old boy who just spent ten minutes snogging a beautiful woman. What did you expect would happen?"

"So, it's...because of me?" She asked shyly.

"Well, sure, Luna. You're gorgeous," replied Harry, earnestly. "I know you've been with the others, didn't they react the same way?"

“Yes, they did,” said the blonde as her cheeks became pink, “but their reactions were not so...pronounced. Would...should I, erm, do you need help, ah, taking care of this?”

Even Harry, daft as he was, being a man, could read the nervousness and apprehension in Luna's voice and face, he attempted to cup her chin, but ended up covering half her face and said, “Let's take things one step at a time, Luna. Besides, if we do get there, I would like to be able to reciprocate. Why don't you just help me with my shorts, give me a kiss goodnight and we can call it a night.”

The blonde witch was happy to do just that. She helped the injured wizard into the massive bed, then laid down next to him, explaining that each witch was going to spend the night with him to make sure they were available if he suddenly needed something. Both teens had small smiles on their faces as they slept.

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The next morning, after Luna helped Harry bathe and put on fresh clothing, the group made their way down to breakfast where any good cheer that resided within the teens quickly evaporated when they read that morning's edition of the Daily Prophet.

Potter attacks Quidditch Match with Dragon

Tragedy struck Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry on Saturday afternoon during the annual Gryffindor versus Slytherin Quidditch Match when a fully grown Ukrainian Ironbelly descended out of the clouds to attack the assembled spectators watching the game.

“It was the most frightening thing I've ever seen,” said sixth year Slytherin Pansy Parkinson. “Just as Draco was going to make a move to grab the snitch and win the game, a dragon broke out of the clouds and dove straight for him.”

Luckily for Draco Malfoy, sixth year Slytherin and starting Seeker and Captain of the Slytherin Quidditch team, he was able to avoid the

oncoming dragon and lead his teammates to safety. When asked why a dragon would attack the school, young Mr. Malfoy had this to say:

“Obviously, Potter somehow called it there. He knew he wouldn't be able to win the game without some kind of interference. I knew something was wrong when he smirked at me as I pulled ahead. I heard him yell something, and seconds later, there was a dragon.”

This is yet another mark against the young man who's recent actions point to him turning dark. Luckily for the students and staff gathered, the aspiring dark wizard was not yet skilled enough to control a fully grown dragon. According to reports coming from the school, the Boy-Who-Lived engaged in a prolonged aerial battle with the Ironbelly above the heads of the fleeing students. It was obviously in an attempt to regain control of the beast so that he could direct it to attack the students once more.

Once the students were safely in the castle, Headmaster Dumbledore and the staff were able to subdue the beast with minimal injury and damage suffered.

If young Mr. Potter has fallen so far as to use such a dangerous animal to attack his fellow students, I ask you this; why is he still amongst the helpless students at Hogwarts? He should be rotting in Azkaban where he belongs.

“Lovely,” was all that Harry had to say about the article. No one had anything else to add, since the Prophet had been printing the same kind of defamatory articles for weeks. They were tempted to hex the smirks off of Malfoy and Parkinson's faces, but the sharp eyes of Professor McGonagall stayed their wands. It was a much more subdued group of students that made their way to their classes that day.

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As promised by McGonagall the evening before, Professor Dumbledore stood to address the students at the end of dinner on Monday evening.

“Good evening, all,” he said in his grandfatherly tone, “I trust you all have had an enjoyable Monday. As you are all aware, Hogwarts was attacked last Saturday during the Quidditch match between the Gryffindors and the Slytherins. A dragon was able to fly through the wards and through the brave and heroic actions of many of our own, a great tragedy was averted. I wish to assure you all that Hogwarts is still the safest place in the world for you to be and that the appropriate measures are being taken to prevent any such attack in the future. I will explain to you what effect these measures will have on your day to day lives in a moment.

“First, though, there are several students that must be recognized for their brave and selfless actions on Saturday. To the entire Gryffindor Quidditch team, I award ten points, each, for your excellent flying in protection of the rest of the study body. To each student who aided in the subduing of the dragon, I award five points, each. To Miss Blaise Zabini, for her truly selfless act of ignoring her own safety to run to the aid of an injured student, I award twenty points. To Mr. Harry Potter, for his heroic actions in flying directly against an angry dragon to save us all, I award fifty points.”

The elderly wizard waited for a few moments for the applause to die down before he spoke again, this time his tone more serious, “After dinner tonight, I shall be adjusting the defences of the castle to not permit any kind of ingress or egress via the air. Unfortunately, this barrier will also work against post owls. The staff and I worked diligently to inform all of your families of this drastic, but necessary, step to ensure your safety. You will still be able to receive letters from them, as I have provided them an alternate route for your mail.

It will take approximately one week to allow all of the owls that are currently residing on the grounds access in and out of the castle. In the meantime, if there is anything urgent that needs to be sent out of the castle, please speak to your Head of House and they will provide a way. I thank you for your patience.” With that, the old man turned and sat back down. The meal over, the students returned to their dorms and attempted to move on with life as normal, though it was difficult with the threat of Voldemort hanging even more oppressively in the air.

Chapter 21:

“Why is this so difficult to comprehend, Harry?” asked Hermione from her spot by the wizard’s side. It was the same night as Dumbledore’s speech at dinner and the bushy haired girl had already changed her charge into his pyjamas. She, too, was in her nightclothes as they lay in his bed side by side. (She Her warm body was pressed up against his left side with her head on his shoulder and her leg thrown over his.

“Oh come on, Hermione,” said the teen as he rolled his eyes, “having seven gorgeous witches willing to share you is not normal.”

The Gryffindor girl giggled and said, “Harry, nothing about you is ever “normal.” When are you going to accept that?”

The messy-haired young man sighed and said, “Fine, this is a level of abnormal beyond anything I’m used to. I mean, as far as I was aware, six of you weren’t even interested in boys! And suddenly you’re all ready and willing to snog me?”

Hermione’s lips, which were puffy from recently snogging Harry, formed into a cute pout as she said, “Are you complaining about us wanting to snog you? Do you not want us?” Even though it was said playfully, Harry could still detect the insecurity and a small amount of fear in his best friend’s voice.

“No, no,” he said, “Merlin, no. Not complaining at all. I may be thick, but I’m not an idiot. I’m just trying to get my head around the change in the situation. I mean take us, for example. Two days ago you were my very best friend who had a girlfriend of her own. Now, well...I don’t even know what to call us now.”

Harry’s best friend could feel the tension and uncertainty rolling off of the young man, so she propped herself on her elbow so she could see him better. She placed a hand on his chest and looked directly into his emerald eyes and said, “Why do we have to be called something? You, erm, you liked kissing me, right?”

The prone wizard answered quickly to reassure his friend, “I did like it. Quite a lot, actually. I’m not against the change in our relationship. I’m

all for it, really. Plenty of upside there. But, I just... I'm trying to understand it."

Hermione smiled sweetly at her flustered friend and leaned down to kiss him lightly on the lips as she said in a reassuring voice, "I'm still your best friend, Harry. I'll always be your best friend. Nothing can ever change that. As important as you say I am to you, you're just as important to me. But, now, we've just added a new...physical dynamic to our interactions. We've hugged plenty of times; this is just the next logical step."

The young wizard narrowed his eyes in suspicion at the intelligent girl hovering above him and said, "You've been preparing me all term, haven't you? With all the touching and hugging. Have you just been 'nudging' me towards this next logical step?"

"No, Harry, no," the witch denied vehemently. "That's not what we've been doing at all. Well, maybe Susan and Padma, but they were just trying to get you to notice them. But none of the rest of us had anything planned out."

Emerald eyes that shone with disbelief and a raised eyebrow prompted the young woman to continue, "Please believe me, Harry, we weren't hugging you and touching you more to coerce you in any way. We came up with the plan, and Mum was the main planner, when we learned what your childhood was like. Mum noticed that you had very little positive physical contact, so we all agreed to provide you with as much as we can."

"So," Harry said uncertainly, "you weren't manipulating me into this?"

"Absolutely not," Hermione replied definitively, "I know how much you hate being manipulated and I would have never let that happen. It wouldn't have been possible for us to be planning anything back then anyway. Daphne, Blaise, and Tracey have only recently admitted that they are attracted to you to themselves and Luna, while I'm sure she was already interested, hadn't yet worked up the courage to tell you yet. She only kissed Padma for the first time a week and a half ago. I don't think she's as comfortable around boys as girls."

“And you?” asked the young man, who was now more relaxed about the situation.

The brunette blushed and sunk back down to rest her head on Harry’s shoulder again and began idly tracing random patterns on the young man’s bare chest. “Me?” she asked innocently, “yes, I fancied you, but I didn’t say anything for fear of losing your friendship. You didn’t seem to think of me as a girl, anyway.

“Then Daphne came along and I fell head over heels for her. I still fancied you a bit, but I realized that as long as you were still a major part of my life and happy, then I could be happy, too. Once Daph told me that she accepted that, I was able to give myself more completely to her. Now, though, I get the best of both worlds.”

Harry tightened his arm around the girl, giving her an awkward hug, and relaxed. The two stayed silent, still completely comfortable being in each other’s presence without the need for words. Hermione was more than half asleep when her pillow spoke quietly, “I’ve always known you were a girl, Hermione, and a beautiful one at that. I just thought that you and Ron would get together. Everyone said you argued like an old married couple, so I thought it was inevitable. I just wanted you both to be happy and in my life. Things didn’t turn out the way I thought they would, but I like these results much better.”

“Me too, Harry,” said the witch with a sleepy sounding voice, “now go to sleep. You need your rest.”

The wizard planted a soft kiss in the middle of her bushy hair and complied, a soft smile on his lips through the whole night.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

As the two best friends were ending their heart to heart, Severus Snape was in the Headmaster’s office. He was sitting on a chair by the lit fireplace, his legs crossed with a cup of tea resting on his knee. His appearance was that of a man who was completely at ease as he sipped at his drink. Normally, though, at this time each week, he would be having his tea in the presence of the Headmaster, but this week the Potions Master was completely alone in the office.

Cold, dark eyes surveyed the room, taking in every detail that they possibly could. From the paintings of previous Headmasters and Headmistresses that were sleeping in their portraits, to the stacks of parchment adorning the desk, to the bookshelves that were sliding open to reveal the exhausted looking current Headmaster emerging from a secret passageway. A smirk attempted to fight its way onto the younger man's sallow face as he watched the ancient wizard tap a series of stones on the wall to close the bookcase-door.

"Severus!" exclaimed Dumbledore as he turned around and caught sight of the current Defence teacher,

"I apologize, dear boy, for forgetting to reschedule our weekly meetings. In my old age I find it more difficult to remember some things. I was merely adjusting the defences of the castle as I said I would at dinner."

"Understandable, Headmaster," said Snape in his silky voice. "You had things of more importance to take care of. Shall I return at another time? Perhaps, when you are a bit more rested?"

"No," Albus said, shaking his head, as he sat in the chair facing the other man. "No, there are things that we must discuss that I fear cannot wait for an old man to get his second wind. A spot of tea and I'll be fine."

While he was speaking, Snape had poured another cup of tea and handed it to the older wizard. They sat in silence as Dumbledore sipped his tea and appeared to regain some of his energy. "Thank you for indulging me, Severus," said Albus, "adjusting the wards does take quite a bit out of me. How have your Defence classes been?"

"The students seem to be catching on, somewhat, to what I am attempting to teach them," replied the Head of Slytherin, "some of them may even survive for more than a minute if they are attacked."

"Excellent," praised the old man. "In these dark times we must do what we can to protect our future. What was the Dark Lord's reaction to the attack?"

The former Death Eater's posture changed completely as he recognized that it was time to discuss "business" as it were. "He was pleased," reported the spy. "While he wanted more casualties, any pain caused to the boy is a plus to the Dark Lord. He was also pleased with the spin that the Prophet put on the situation."

"Hm," said Dumbledore as he stroked his beard thoughtfully. "And his new wand?"

"The wandmaker has been given the materials and has begun work, though it appears to be slow going," informed Snape, "though whether this is due to Ollivander's desire to withhold this new wand from the Dark Lord or to natural setbacks is uncertain."

"Any attacks that the Order should be aware of?"

"None that I was told of, though I believe he will seek to attack the students during their next Hogsmeade visit, given enough preparation time."

"Thank you, Severus," praised the old wizard, "you do the Light a great service at great risk to yourself. It is appreciated."

The skinny, pale man nodded his thanks and rose to leave as he said, "Thank you, Headmaster. If there is nothing else..."

"Actually," said Albus, making his Defence Professor pause and turn around, "there is one more thing. I would like to discuss this potion that I believe you gave to Alastor to aid in his lessons for young Mr. Potter. The Vision of Truth, I believe?"

"It was not my intention to cause the boy harm," answered Severus and Dumbledore accepted the answer at face value, "I was under the impression that he had learned Occlumency from Shacklebolt, but it appears the whelp is unteachable. Had he any kind of grasp on clearing his mind to an appropriate level, the potion would not have been a problem."

"A valid mistake," admitted the Headmaster, "though perhaps it introduces a deeper problem. We may need to get Harry some additional training in Occlumency." At the angry look on Snape's face, the old man continued, "Oh no, no, I am not asking you to teach him again. Though you are as adept as any I can think of, I believe there is too much built up hostility for Harry to be able to learn the art from you. I believe I will take on this responsibility myself."

"Very well, Headmaster," said Severus, bowing slightly, "if there is nothing else?"

"Hm? Oh, no, it was an honest mistake. That is all I have. Goodnight, Severus."

"Headmaster."

The smirk that the bitter man had been fighting throughout the meeting finally crept its way onto his face as he exited the rotating stairs. His robes, as always, billowed behind him as he swept purposefully through the darkened halls of the old castle. Had any students been in the halls at the time, they would have been terrified of the imposing man as he strode towards his quarters.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

"Take a seat everyone," Professor Flitwick said excitedly from his perch atop the stack of books at the front of the Charms classroom, "we have a very interesting class today."

The half goblin Charms master waited until all of his sixth years were in their seats and at least pretending to pay attention before he continued. "In light of the Headmaster's speech last night, I decided that we should move ahead to cover wards. Can anyone tell me what the term ward stands for? Yes Miss Patil?"

Padma sat up straighter, shot a smirk at Hermione, and spoke, "The term ward stands for Wide Area Residual Defence."

"Correct," said Flitwick, "five points to Ravenclaw. Who can tell me what a ward does? Miss Greengrass."

“As the title suggests,” said Daphne, dryly causing the tiny teacher to chuckle, “a ward is a spell that is cast over a large area that is active for an extended period of time.”

“Excellent,” praised the Charms teacher, “five points for Slytherin. Now, let’s give some examples of some wards that can be set up. Just shout one out when I call on you.”

“Anti-apparition,” answered Ron.

“Anti-Portkey,” said Terry Boot.

“Notice-me-not,” said Ernie MacMillan.

When Harry was called on, he tilted his head and asked, “Couldn’t any spell technically be a ward? So long as it is set over a large area and will last for a while?”

“Yes!” cried Filius as he applauded. “That’s exactly the point I was trying to make. Ten points to Gryffindor, Mr. Potter and two points for each of your houses Mr. Weasley, Mr. Boot, and Mr. MacMillan. The name Wide Area Residual Defence is actually a bit of a misnomer. A ward does not actually have to be used as a defence, though that is its most common application. Any spell, if you know how to do it, can be set over a wide area and will last, sometimes forever. The wards around Hogwarts have been around since the castle was built. Who can tell me some ways that wards can be set? Miss Granger.”

Hermione barely held in a laugh when Blaise pouted at not being called on. She regained her composure and began in what Ron called her “Oh, oho, I know this” voice, though he only ever called it that once and was purple and waddled like a duck for a week afterwards, “The most common method to setting a ward is to use rune stones set around the object to be protected. The number and quality of the stones directly affect the power and length of a ward. The material making up the rune stone also affects the effectiveness of the spell. A bloodstone is the material that can get the most powerful results, though creating a bloodstone is considered a dark art.”

“Excellent, Miss Granger, excellent! Twenty points to Gryffindor!” The Professor was so excited that he nearly fell off of his stack of books. “Today, we are going to practice setting our own, personal wards. A ward to cover something as small as a person, or a bed, for example, does not need a rune stone to power it. A general rule of wards is that the larger the area, the more rune stones it will need to power the ward. For an area as large as Hogwarts and its grounds, it is said that there are hundreds, if not thousands of rune stones hidden and buried throughout the area. None but the current Headmaster is aware of how many and where they are for security reasons.”

After that explanation, Professor Flitwick asked the class to pull out their wands and practice setting a cheering charm ward around their desks. While he couldn’t actually perform the spell yet, or even practice the wand movement, Harry still helped those around him perfect their casting, which earned Gryffindor another fifteen points.

This was how most of his classes went for the first few days of that week for Harry. He would listen attentively to the theory section of the class then he would try and aid those around them as they worked during the practical section of the class. It was all he could do to keep from trying to perform the spells anyway, though he was stayed by the thought of Madam Pomfrey’s face if he were admitted to the Hospital Wing for magical exhaustion after her daily warnings. He simply could not wait to be able to perform magic once more.

He didn’t think McGonagall would want to have their normal training session that day as he could not practice at all, figuring that she had better things to do. The young wizard still went, though, as he didn’t want to be rude if she did show up and he didn’t. His politeness proved fortuitous when he entered the Transfiguration teacher’s office to find two comfortable looking chairs and a table with a tea service sitting between them.

“Hello, Professor,” greeted Harry as he took the seat across from the Gryffindor Head of House.

“Good afternoon, Harry,” McGonagall said and gestured to the seat across from her. “Have a seat. Would you like some tea?”

The teen raised his still bandaged hands and said. "I would, but unfortunately I lack the ability to feed myself."

"Yes," the Gryffindor Head of House said dryly, "I've noticed the solution to that problem that you've come up with."

"Oh no," said Harry, "that wasn't my idea. I'm not exactly complaining about it, but I certainly didn't think of it first."

"Hm," replied the older witch with a quirked eyebrow,. "I'm just pleased that you are no longer hiding from them. I could see how much it was hurting all of those involved."

Nodding his head in agreement, the wizard said, "I'm glad, too. Have there been any consequences in regards to this?"

McGonagall pursed her lips and said, "From what I have heard, Molly and Celia cornered Alastor in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place. Remus said that by the end of their rebuke, Mad-eye was weeping and sucking his thumb. Though, as you can imagine, there was some hyperbole involved. Dear Mr. Moody has requested and been granted a new assignment. One that has him away from Headquarters for great lengths of time. I'm sure those women got their points across."

Harry chuckled and said, "I think there is a date with a Pensieve in our near future. There is no way I'm not seeing that."

Minerva merely smiled and nodded before she became more serious, "Albus was supposed to talk to Professor Snape last evening. I am unaware of what was said in that conversation or what steps were taken to ensure that these events do not happen again."

The green eyed wizard's mood darkened considerably at that news and he snorted derisively saying, "Snape probably made up some excuse and told the Headmaster exactly what he wanted to hear so the old man could pass it off as a simple mistake. I doubt the overgrown bat was even scolded lightly."

"That may, unfortunately, be true," agreed the stern older woman, "therefore, I suggest that you remain vigilant at all times. This school year seems to have had more dangerous incidents in it than in years past. I just don't want to see you hurt again."

"Thank you, Professor, but," Harry replied, holding up his bandaged hands, "I seem to draw danger and injury toward myself like a magnet."

"True, which is why you are training as you have been," replied Minerva, "so, let's continue that."

For the next hour or so, the two chatted and reviewed all that the Transfiguration teacher had taught her student in the past two months and discussed where he would like to go with his time there and what he would like to learn. By the end of the session, Harry was truly excited at what he was set to learn over the next months.

He bid his tutor farewell and hurried down to the Great Hall to meet up with his friends for dinner, where his good mood quickly spread throughout the group. Hermione was exceptionally chipper after Harry promised to teach her anything that he learned in his extra lessons.

When the evening meal was over, the young wizard decided to spend some time with his male friends in the Gryffindor boys' dormitory. The young men spent several hours laying about discussing the recent Quidditch match, ignoring the dragon attack, their classes, and the physical attributes of the girls in the school. Harry was conspicuously quiet during the last bit of the conversation. Eventually, the raven-haired young man had to regrettably leave his friends and head to Madam Pomfrey for his treatment before bed.

He was surprised to find, when he reached his bedroom, a beautiful blonde witch lounging on his bed. He really shouldn't have been as surprised as he was since he knew that it was Blaise's turn to help him that evening and the next morning. Her blue eyes sparkled with amusement when the young man squeaked and jumped when he finally saw her on the bed.

"Hello, Harry," she said as she slid to the edge of the bed, "have a good evening with the lads?"

"Blaise!" the young man exclaimed. "I'm a little surprised you're here. It's been a while since I've been in a room with you alone."

He didn't mean it as a rebuke and he didn't speak with any anger, but the blonde Slytherin still looked down in both shame and embarrassment. "It has been a while. I need to explain to you, Harry, what happened. Explain and apologize."

"Apologize?" Harry asked as he sat on the bed beside the nervous girl. "I'm the one that should apologize to you. I shouldn't have kissed you that night. I-"

"No, Harry, you didn't start that kiss," interrupted Blaise, "I did. It was supposed to be just a quick peck in thanks, but it felt so good to be kissing you."

"So," the green eyed wizard tried to clarify, "you're telling me that you're sorry for kissing me?"

The blonde shook her head no. "Not at all. You're an excellent kisser. What I'm apologizing for is ignoring and avoiding you ever since. As Tracey bluntly pointed out to me the other day; it's what I do when I'm confused by my emotions. I don't think I could have been more confused by how good it felt to kiss you and how much I wanted to do it more."

"I guess I can see where kissing me could be confusing..." he trailed off, a bit confused.

"Not you, specifically, Harry," replied the girl as she rolled her blue eyes, "a man in general. Before you, I have never had any kind of physical or emotional attraction to any male whatsoever. Then you come along and I start having the same feelings that I did when I was falling for Tracey. I ignored her for almost two months before she got fed up and snogged me cross-eyed."

The young wizard sat for a few minutes in silence as he processed the information that the beautiful blonde had given him. While he was processing, the witch took the time to change him into his standard bed time apparel. She had a major confidence boost when she saw him react to her, even though he wasn't truly paying attention. The girl was also terrified because, before then, she truly hadn't even thought of what she was supposed to do with...that. She concluded that she would do as Luna and Hermione did when presented with the same problem and ignore it for the time being. Things were complicated enough as they were without adding extra stress.

Finally, the teen wizard came out of his daze and said, "So, does this mean you are no longer confused?"

"No more confusion," Blaise agreed, "I know exactly what I want now."

"And would that be for me to snog you cross-eyed?" Harry asked a bit eagerly, prompting the Slytherin to laugh, nod, and lean into his embrace. A short time later, a raven haired, green eyed wizard settled in to sleep with a blonde haired, blue cross-eyed girl next to him. The wizard had a smug grin on his face throughout the night.

Harry's grin was less smug the next morning as he stood completely naked in the milky white waist deep water in the bath. In fact, his face was more of a grimace than anything as the invisible magical sponges vigorously scrubbed his body as directed by Blaise. The blonde girl appeared to be having a grand time as she sat on the edge of the bath and let her feet dangle into the water.

"So, when do you get to use magic again?" the girl asked as she directed the sponges below the surface of the water.

"EEP!!" squeaked Harry, "Gentle! Gentle!"

"Oops, sorry," giggled Blaise as she concentrated on what she was doing.

“Better, thank you,” sighed the young man, “I’m hoping that Madam Pomfrey clears me to use magic today. Not that it would do any good, since I can’t hold a wand until these bandages are off.”

“Do you really expect me to believe that?” asked the blonde sweetly.

“Erm, yes?” replied a very confused Harry.

The young woman suddenly levelled a very serious gaze at the wizard as she spoke, “I saw you Harry. I was out of my mind with fear, but I saw you. You didn’t use your wand when you put up that shield against the dragon. I know you can do wandless magic.”

“Oh, that,” said the wizard with a shrug, “it’s just a little something I’ve been working on since the summer. I haven’t really told anyone about it. It’s nothing special.”

“It absolutely is something special, you dolt!” exclaimed an exasperated Blaise. “I don’t know anyone, save the Headmaster, maybe, that can competently do magic without a wand. Do you even need to use one at all anymore?”

“I do still need a wand,” replied Harry as he moved to the stairs to climb out of the bath, “Wandless magic really only works well for brute strength spells like Reducto, or Reparo, or shield spells. Anything that involves any kind of finesse or delicacy, like Transfiguration, I still need the focus that my wand provides. Are you going to turn around while I get out?”

The blonde merely smirked and slowly shook her head no.

“Right,” grumbled the blushing boy, “if Luna and Hermione wouldn’t turn around either, I don’t know why I would expect anyone else to turn around. Not like I’m naked, here.”

“Oh, hush,” scolded Blaise, “I think you like having us ogle your bits.”

Harry arched an eyebrow and asked dryly, “And why would I enjoy being ogled?”

The blonde beauty smirked and flicked her wand four times, drying and dressing the young man quickly, before she turned her back to him and dropped her robe, which revealed that she was wearing nothing underneath. She looked back over her shoulder and said coyly, "Because it relieves you of the guilt from when you ogle us," then sauntered her way into one of the showers.

The teen wizard was broken out of the hormone induced stupor caused by having a naked girl in front of him by the sound of the shower being turned on. He shook his head to clear the cobwebs and said as he left the bathroom, "Well, yeah, but it doesn't make me any less nervous." Her response was delighted laughter from the shower stall.

The Great Hall was full as Harry's group entered for breakfast. He noticed, as they passed through the doors, the two stacks of newspapers on each side. Apparently, the Daily Prophet and the Quibbler would not let something as trivial as wards stop them from circulating their issues. What caught the interest of the sixth year Gryffindor wizard was that the stacks of the Quibbler were almost empty while the Prophet looked to be barely touched.

He was about to ask someone to pick up a copy of Luna's father's paper when he noticed that each of his friends had a copy. The young man just smiled and led them to their normal spot on the Gryffindor table. He was seated between Blaise and Padma that day and the two witches were quick to fill his plate with his normal morning choices.

Hermione was quick to open her paper and see what had been written in response to the Prophet's slanderous article after the dragon attack.

"So, what's it say?" asked Ron from further down the table, spraying food onto Parvati, who was sitting across from him.

"Oh, gross!" the girl shouted. "Lavender, can't you do something about that?"

The ditzy blonde girl regarded her boyfriend for a moment before she leaned into his ear and whispered fiercely. Ron's eyes widened and his face paled at whatever his girlfriend was saying until she sat back and said sweetly, "Are we clear, Won-Won?" The redheaded boy just nodded his head frantically.

"Right," said Hermione, as she glanced at the pair, "I don't want to know. The Quibbler basically just gave a factual accounting of the attack then reminded readers that the Prophet is under Death Eater control and should not be believed. He also said that there has been a sighting of a Galloping Snarfalump in Glasgow. Luna, what..."

"Don't worry about it, love," said a giggling Daphne, "just stick to the pertinent information."

The bushy haired Gryffindor nodded wearily and sighed as she neatly folded the newspaper and picked up her fork. "What do you think Professor Flitwick will be having us do in Charms today?" she asked in a successful attempt to change the subject.

The group discussed possible class topics quietly until it was time to go to classes. The Professors had all simply continued their classes as if nothing had happened on the weekend, bar Flitwick's syllabus change and Harry thought it was a smart move. Forcing the students back into their normal routine would help them put the danger they were in out of their minds for a time. If the occupants of the castle were allowed to dwell on what was going on in the outside world, there would be more than a few breakdowns.

It was a wary and thoughtful Harry that left the Charms classroom that day and headed to lunch with his friends.

"What did Flitwick want, Harry?" asked Susan as she threaded her arm through his. Just before the class was dismissed, the tiny Professor had called the raven haired Gryffindor to the front of the classroom for a short, whispered conversation.

"Hm?" he asked before he blinked and returned to reality. "Oh, he just cancelled our lesson for this afternoon and told me that Dumbledore wants to see me then, instead."

“Do you know what about?” asked Tracey from his other side.

“Not really,” Harry said, “but he’ll most likely try to use my need for a new Defence tutor to rekindle some kind of relationship between us.”

“Will you let him?” asked Daphne over her shoulder.

“I’m inclined to,” answered the young wizard, “even though I still don’t trust him and I’m still angry at him, he’s far too much of a resource to completely ignore.”

“That’s very Slytherin thinking,” said Susan, though there was no rebuke in her voice.

Harry’s response was cut off and the group of teens ran into another bunch of students that seemed to be waiting for them. Justin Finch-Fletchley and Ernie MacMillan stood at the front of the group of original DA members that had turned their backs on Harry.

“Harry, old chap” said Justin in his pompous manner, “we were wondering if we might have a word with you.”

The raven haired Gryffindor merely arched an eyebrow and said, “Speak.”

Off balance from the emerald eyed wizard’s gruff acknowledgement and slightly nervous from the angry glares from the true DA surrounding him, the pompous Hufflepuff stuttered a bit as he spoke,

“W-w-well you see, old bean, we-ah, well we’ve all realized that we were a bit mistaken when we left the DA during that last meeting and we’d like to apologize. See if you had it in the goodness of your heart to let us back in.”

Harry’s eyes squinted a bit for a moment, and then he smiled widely, “Sure! You’re all welcome to come back to the DA. We meet on Wednesday nights. You’ll need to get there early as the seats have been filling up quickly.”

“Erm,” said Ernie as he stepped forward and looked around cautiously to see if anyone were listening in, “we didn’t mean that DA. We’re talking about the other one.”

The Gryffindor boy cocked his head to the side in confusion and said, "I'm afraid I don't follow you. I'm only aware of the one DA, and it meets on Wednesday nights."

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake!” snapped Terry Boot, “He’s talking about the one that meets on Sundays.”

“You must be mistaken,” said a very contrite sounding Harry, “you see, that’s not an open club. That’s just me and my closest and most trusted friends taking some time out of our busy schedules to get together and talk. There’s no club there. Now, I’m famished, so we’ll be heading down to lunch. I look forward to seeing you on Wednesday.”

“Harry,” said Ron as the group rounded the corner and made for the Great Hall, “that was brilliant!”

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“Come in, Harry,” invited the Headmaster when the defensive spells alerted him that the young man had reached his door. The old man loved catching people off guard like that, though Harry did not look amused as he entered the office and sat down. The elderly wizard sighed inwardly at the guarded look on the young Gryffindor’s face, showing once again how much their relationship had suffered from his own mistakes.

“Would you care for a lemon drop?” Dumbledore asked out of habit. He continued after Harry’s polite refusal, “How are you recovering, my boy?”

“I’m as well as can be expected, sir.” replied Harry as he held up his bandaged hands, “Madam Pomfrey is pleased with my recovery rate, but said it will still take the rest of the week for me to heal. She said that I was lucky that the treatment of my previous...injuries did not affect which treatment options were available to me.”

“Excellent,” said the Headmaster, “and your magical exhaustion?”

“I’m back to normal in that respect, sir,” informed the younger wizard, “although I won’t be able to actually perform any magic until my hands are healed.”

“Of course,” replied the old man as he steeped his fingers under his crooked nose, “I must thank you, once again, for your actions that day. Your quick thinking and impressive flying no doubt saved many, many lives.”

“Thank you, sir,” replied Harry with a nod. The two wizards sat in silence for a long moment as they regarded each other. Neither of them seemed to become uncomfortable with the silence as it stretched further. The Headmaster stared into the emerald eyes of his young protégé and saw the defiance and challenge held within. He knew that the younger man was expecting him to attempt a Legilimency attack, but the elder wizard also knew that to do so would completely shatter the already frail trust that Harry had in him.

This was completely unacceptable, so the bearded man simply stared at the young saviour. Finally, Dumbledore broke the silence with a chuckle as he said, “I’m not going to read your mind, Harry.” He laughed harder at the look of shock on Harry’s face. “Dear boy, I am trying to regain your trust. I may be mistaken, but one does not regain trust by invading another’s privacy. No, I give you my word that I will not attempt Legilimency on you without you asking first, unless it is to save you from harm.”

“And why would I ask you to scan my mind?” inquired the teen.

“Excellent question, which brings us to our first topic,” said the Headmaster, “I wish to discuss the events of your last Defence tutoring session. I have spoken with both Alastor and Severus about this and have their side of the story. I would like to hear yours.”

Harry shrugged and said, “Not much to tell from my standpoint. Snape brewed the potion, Moody slipped it to me, I was nearly driven insane. Pretty cut and dry, if you ask me.”

"I agree with you, Harry," explained Dumbledore. "I merely wished to ensure that you did not have anything you would like to add."

At Harry's head shake in the negative, the old man continued, "Very well. I spoke with Professor Snape and he told me that the effects of the potion given to you could be mitigated by someone with enough skill in Occlumency."

The teen snorted and muttered, "Of course he did."

"I know that you do not trust Professor Snape, Harry," said the Headmaster calmly, "and that this incident did nothing to improve your opinion of the man. I want to assure you that I do not condone what was done and I have made my displeasure clear to both Severus and Alastor, though not as effectively as Mrs. Weasley and Mrs. Granger."

Though Harry's face looked doubtful at the effectiveness of the Headmaster making his displeasure known, the young man still nodded at what the older wizard said. Dumbledore continued, "Now, while this situation should never have happened, it does bring up an issue I would like to discuss with you. I know that over the summer Kingsley had taken to instructing you on how to protect your mind. Have you been continuing to practice what he taught you?"

"Yes sir," said the raven haired teen, "I think it has really helped me in controlling my temper."

"Ah, yes," replied the grandfatherly old man with a smile, "a trait that you inherited from your mother, I believe. While I am pleased to hear that you are continuing to practice shielding your mind, you will not truly master the art without further instruction."

"If you suggest I take lessons with that greaseball again, sir," Harry nearly snarled, "I will be out of this office before you can blink."

"No, Harry, no," placated the white haired man, "I agree that trying to have Professor Snape teach you Occlumency last year was an unmitigated disaster and it was one of the many mistakes I made. No,

I have given up on trying to force the two of you past your problems with each other by putting you together. I was going to suggest that I take up your instruction on the practice of shielding your mind, something I should have done in the first place. Will you place enough trust in me to allow this?"

Dumbledore did not flinch or squirm or avert his eyes as Harry stared hard at him. The Headmaster allowed himself a small feeling of victory the young man in front of him agreed to the tutoring.

"Excellent, my boy," he said as he popped a lemon drop into his mouth, "now, seeing as you will no longer be receiving Defence instruction from Alastor, there is a position to fill in your rank of tutors. Luckily, I have received notice from Miss Tonks that her Auror assignment that kept her away has ended and she is available to teach you again."

Emerald eyes sparkling with happiness, Harry exclaimed, "That would be excellent, sir! Thank you."

"You're quite welcome, Harry," said Albus, his eyes twinkling, "young Nymphadora was also quite excited to, how did she say it? Ah, yes, "Put you through your paces to make sure the old man didn't go soft on you." She had quite the smirk on her face as she said it."

"I'll look forward to it," replied the teen wizard, his grin predatory.

"Now, do you have any concerns for me?" asked Dumbledore politely.

"I do," replied Harry, shifting from student to leader. "What is being done about the Prophet? They've completely stopped reporting any kind of fact whatsoever. Why hasn't the Ministry shut them down, sir?"

"The reason the Ministry, or anyone else for that matter," said the old man, wearily, "has failed to do anything about the articles the Daily Prophet are printing is because no one can find them. They have taken their offices underground, so to speak. As you well know, Voldemort's forces have essentially seized control of the paper. The editor-in-chief, already a man of few morals, is a coward on top of

that and folded at the slightest pressure from Lucius Malfoy. We suspect they have put their offices under a Fidelius Charm and as such have no way of stopping them.

“Our only true way of fighting them is to provide an opposing viewpoint,” continued Dumbledore, “which you have done by convincing Mr. Lovegood to back you with his paper. We have noticed a dramatic fall in the circulation of the Prophet, and a staggering increase in the amount of Quibblers being read, so it is working.”

“It’s still troubling, though,” said Harry, “how many people believe in these lies. No good will come of it.”

“I cannot disagree with you, Harry,” answered Albus. “The best we can do is be prepared for whatever comes.”

“Yes, sir,” answered the emerald-eyed boy.

“Now, if there is nothing else,” said the Headmaster to dismiss his student, but was forestalled by the look on the teen’s face.

“Actually, sir,” the younger wizard said, “there is one more thing. I want to know how Millicent Bulstrode is being punished for attacking Adelaide during the dragon attack.”

The old man had a serious look on his face as he replied, “Professor Snape has spoken with both students and has determined that what happened was an accident.”

“You don’t actually believe that do you?” asked Harry, incredulous, “Bulstrode didn’t even stop to help the girl she had just stepped on!”

“Alas, Harry, I cannot punish students when there is no evidence that they did anything wrong,” admonished the Headmaster.

Harry was still not convinced as he snorted and said, “Oh please, Snape suggests that I be expelled with no evidence at all.”

“And yet you are still here,” said Dumbledore. “Please Harry, based on the information that I have it was clumsiness and cowardice that had Miss Stevenson injured in that field, nothing more.”

A cold, calculating look appeared on the face of the sixth year Gryffindor, who simply nodded and said as he rose from his seat, “Fine, if there is nothing else, sir?”

“That is all I have to discuss with you, Harry. Enjoy your dinner and I will see you here on Wednesday for our lesson,” said Dumbledore by means of a dismissal. The old man sighed and asked for a house elf to bring him his dinner as he began working on the piles of paperwork on his desk. He hoped that his relationship with the youngest Potter was getting better. He would just have to continue on this path and see where it led them.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

“I think I can finally tell you and Parvati apart now, Pad,” said Harry as he watched the Ravenclaw girl take notes from her Arithmancy book. The two were relaxing in the wizard’s massive bed after Padma had helped Harry change into his pyjamas. There had been no romantic or sexual undertones in any of their interactions that night. The young man thought for a bit that it was because she didn’t like him like that. But that was before he sat back and observed her for a while.

“Oh?” she said in a distracted tone, though Harry caught her quickly glance up from her work and look at him from head to toe and blush very lightly. It was the seventh time she had done that in the past fifteen minutes.

“There are several things, really,” he said nonchalantly as he glared at his right hand and tried to will away the unreachable itch that had formed on the back of it, “that make it quite easy to tell you apart. But you have to get to know each of you to see them.”

“Such as,” she asked with a raised eyebrow. The olive-skinned girl met Harry’s green eyes in a moment of defiance before her cheeks darkened in a blush once more and she looked back down at her notes.

“Well, the first is actually quite interesting,” replied the emerald eyed boy, “it’s your hands.”

Padma blinked in surprise and looked at her hands, then back up at Harry questioningly.

“Yep, your hands,” he said resolutely, “You are both ambidextrous. But, you can tell you and Parvati apart because she likes to write with her right hand and use wand in her left while you like to write with your left and cast with your right.”

True to his words, Padma was holding her quill in her left hand while her wand was lying by her right leg. “Impressive,” she said as she abandoned her work and rolled on her side to face the wizard in bed with her, “I don’t think anyone else has picked that out yet. You said several things, what else?”

“Well, there is how you each display your sexiness in different ways,” said the young man as he too shifted to his side and locked eyes with the young woman.

“Explain,” she said.

“Parvati is more obvious about it.” Harry said, his eyes searching her face, seemingly memorizing it, “She’ll unbutton an extra button on her shirt to show a bit more cleavage or fold the waist band of her skirt over to show a little bit more of her legs. You, though, you don’t show as much skin as Parvati, but you wear your clothes tighter. Sometimes I can’t imagine how you actually fit into your jeans, but when you have them on, I have to concentrate to keep from drooling.”

Padma smirked as she blushed and said, “Magic,” surprising a laugh from the wizard that had readjusted the way he was leaning and incidentally moved an inch or two closer. “Anything else?” she asked as she too readjusted and slid closer. The two teens were close enough that they could feel each other’s body heat.

“Yep,” said Harry, “one more thing: your nerves. The way the two of you express your nerves is completely different. Parvati, when she

get nervous, smoothes down her clothes and giggles about pretty much anything. You, though, try to distract yourself with something to read while you sneak glances at whatever you are nervous about.”

Padma’s blush was massive at being found out. She averted her eyes and whispered, “Very astute.”

“Thank you,” said the young man as he looked steadily at the Ravenclaw’s face. “So, what were you nervous about?”

“I was nervous that I would turn into a stuttering mess when I finally got to kiss you properly and that I would screw it up,” she said quietly.

Harry merely leaned forward and lightly pressed his lips to hers. They only held it for a brief moment before they broke apart and the wizard said, “Are you a stuttering mess now?”

“No,” said Padma, before she lunged forward and fused her lips against his and drove her tongue into his mouth. Harry quickly picked up the intensity of the moment and gave as good as he got. It was only the fact that he was unable to use his hands or magic that any clothes were not removed.

Harry pulled back, breathing deeply, and stuttered, “N-n-no st-t-tuttering at all,” causing the girl in his arms to laugh and hold him close. Like the previous nights, the teens did not do much more than kissing, each willing to take things slowly. For the fourth night in a row, Harry slept the whole night through without a nightmare.

O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O_O

It was Friday night in Grimmauld Place and Celia Granger was going crazy. She was busily dusting the spotless library as she nibbled on her bottom lip in worry. She had heard about the attack on the Quidditch match in detail from Dumbledore and Minerva, but until she heard from her kids she couldn’t force herself to believe they were alright. Hell, Harry wasn’t alright; he couldn’t even use his hands, though the girls were proving to be exemplary stand-ins.

Celia growled and considered kicking an open bag of flour through the room to give herself something to clean. She truly appreciated what Dobby and Winky did for them, but how was she supposed to nervously clean something if there was nothing dirty!

A feminine chuckle interrupted her musings and the non-magical woman whirled around, ready to explode at whoever was laughing at her expense. She refrained, though, because it was a tired looking Molly Weasley standing in the doorway. Celia knew that Molly was just as worried, but the older woman sure seemed to be handling it better.

“How do you do it?” asked Celia as she collapsed into a chair in front of the fireplace. “You’ve had, what, five of them go through already? How are you sane?”

Molly smiled and sat in the chair next to Celia’s and replied, “Well, first of all, it was never like this until Harry, Ron and Hermione started school. The most I ever had to worry about was what kind of mischief my children were getting up to. I also had at least one child to look after until Ginny left, so that kept me occupied. I think that is the key, though; keeping yourself busy.”

“Did you ever truly know what was happening at that school?” asked Hermione’s mother.

“Not really, no,” replied the redheaded woman, “and I certainly never knew how deeply involved in everything those children were. Now that we know, it’ll probably be worse. We’ll just have to help each other to keep ourselves sane.”

“And how do you suggest we do that?” inquired the brunette.

“Why, I do believe Alastor is manning the Floo this evening,” responded Molly.

“Bugger,” said Moody as his magical eye saw the evil smirks on the two mothers as they made their way to the kitchen.

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